



fig. 1
Displays by the Central Union Sales Agency (right and left) and the Silk Trust (center) at the Soviet Textiles for Daily Life exhibition, Moscow, 1928.

Russian Fabric Design, 1928–32

Charlotte Douglas

After the devastation of the Civil War and Lenin's consequent economic reforms that emphasized individual initiative and allowed limited free enterprise, there was widespread reaction on the part of Bolshevik activists against such apparent ideological "backsliding." Among young Marxist artists there was a drive to develop a pragmatic critical theory and to apply simple tests for political content in art, as well as a concerted effort to enlist the Party's approval and support. By the late 1920s, all artistic media in the country were being subjected to strong pressures to bear a clear and persuasive ideological message. The primary organ of these pressures was not the government directly or Communist Party ideologues but the artists themselves, many of whom had formed influential organizations that moved the class warfare that was engaging other sectors of society into the arts. These young people saw themselves as upholding the Party line, and they carried on their agitation through organizations and exhibitions, social education and political maneuvering, and publications, especially the journals *Iskusstvo v massy* (*Art to the Masses*, 1929–32), the organ of AKhR (the Association of Artists of the Revolution); *Za proletarskoe iskusstvo* (*For Proletarian Art*, 1931–32), the publication of RAPKh (the Russian Association of Proletarian Artists); and *Brigada khudozhnikov* (*Artists' Brigade*, 1931–32), the journal of FOSKh (the Federation of Associations of Soviet Artists).

The older generation of avant-garde fabric artists such as Ol'ga Rozanova, Varvara Stepanova, and Liubov' Popova had rejected figuration in textile patterns in favor of geometric designs, which offered a distinct break from former styles and appeared devoid of all references to particular social classes. Abstract or non-objective textiles were seen as a means of establishing a new life, international in scope and classless in structure.

The younger textile artists and critics, to a large extent the students of the abstract designers, in the late 1920s abandoned the geometric principles that had been the foundation of their training. They argued instead that fabric, as a basic visual element in the everyday environment, was a major weapon in the struggle for current social ideals—collective farm life, sports, industrialization, engineering, and electrification. These young designers were militant in their search for a proletarian rather than a classless art, and they led the charge against both the old floral designs, which they considered patently bourgeois, and the recent Constructivist geometries, which they associated with leftist political deviations. They themselves became the inventors of a brilliant new Soviet figurative ornament, and they attempted to force its production throughout the textile industry.

A major display of the work of both generations of textile artists took place between October 1928 and February 1929 at the exhibition *Bytovoï sovetskii tekstil'* (*Soviet Textiles for Daily Life*), held at Vkhutein, Moscow's famous Higher Artistic-Technical Institute. Timed to coincide with the official beginning of the First Five-Year Plan—Stalin's forced march of the Soviet Union into industrialization—the exhibition was a broad survey of all elements of the textile industry: there were displays by various factories and their in-house designers; by sales agents, who exhibited samples of cloth along with the corresponding sales records; by schools, including various regional technical schools and Vkhutein; and by individual faculty members and designers who were selling their work either directly to factories or to the All-Union Textile Syndicate—an association of factories and trusts and an administrative body for the industry (fig. nos. 1, 4). The purpose of the exhibition was to consider the Soviet textile industry as a whole and to establish a starting line for its coming five-year sprint to rectify severe fabric shortages. The

exhibition had been suggested by the Society of Textile Artists, the artists' professional organization, and eagerly supported by the active and politically conscious students at Vkhutein, many of whom were women and all of whom were close to graduation. The official sponsors were the Chief Art Administration and the All-Union Textile Syndicate. Over fifty Vkhutein students took part, about a third of whom were students of weaving and the rest designers of printed fabric (fig. nos. 2–3).¹ The work of established artists and faculty such as Liudmila Maiakovskaia, Evgeniia Pribyl'skaia, and Varvara Stepanova was prominently shown. The designs attributed to individual artists—as opposed to one or another of the factory collectives—were predominantly geometric. Some of the Vkhutein students, however, exhibited their latest “theme” designs.

A jury composed of representatives of the Art Administration, the Textile Syndicate, the Academy of Artistic Sciences, and various arts organizations under the aegis of the Central Committee of the Communist Party awarded prizes for designs. Unable to agree on an “ideal solution to the problem of decorating fabric under contemporary conditions,” the jury failed to award a first prize, but second and third prizes were given both to working artists and to students. Among the sixteen second-prize winners were Maiakovskaia, Oskar Griun, and K. A. Shchuko, and the students Mariia Anufrieva and Tat'iana Chachkhiani (fig. nos. 5–6, plate nos. 558, 561). The thirteen third-prize winners included Stepanova and Pribyl'skaia (fig. no. 7, plate no. 554).² The majority of the prizewinning designs were abstract. In a review of the section of student weaving, the work was unfavorably compared to the weaving by Bauhaus students that had been shown at Vkhutein the previous spring; the poor results were attributed to some extent to the school's lack of adequate equipment.³ The exhibition had yet another purpose, one which was less overt but nevertheless present in the minds of many of the organizers. They hoped that the exhibit would give an impetus to the establishment of a central design studio that would serve all the textile factories and trusts. Such a studio would obviate the need for design studios associated with individual factories and make it possible to respond efficiently to market demands.⁴ A central studio would also limit the need for French pattern books.

Prior to World War I, Russian factories subscribed to albums of French fabric designs that were issued at intervals in Paris. These provided the main source of clothing and upholstery designs manufactured for the urban middle class. In addition to the French designs, which were sometimes modified slightly by the factory artists, traditional cotton floral patterns were produced for rural and provincial use, and special designs aimed at local tastes were made for export eastward—to Central Asia, Persia, western China, Mongolia, and Afghanistan.

World War I, the two revolutions, and the Civil War effectively destroyed the Russian textile industry. Of the almost nine hundred factories operating in Russia in 1913, fewer than a third had reopened by 1921, and these were capable of producing only the most basic types of cloth—sometimes completely unprinted. The next several years were spent in reorganization and in the gradual recovery of the industry. By 1927 the industry had just about regained its 1913 level of production, but many of the former managers and workers had been lost and the industry was contending with inadequate administration and inexperienced workers recently arrived from the countryside. By late in the decade, therefore, with industrial output gradually improving, the question of again subscribing to the Parisian pattern books was being considered throughout the industry. Such a suggestion met

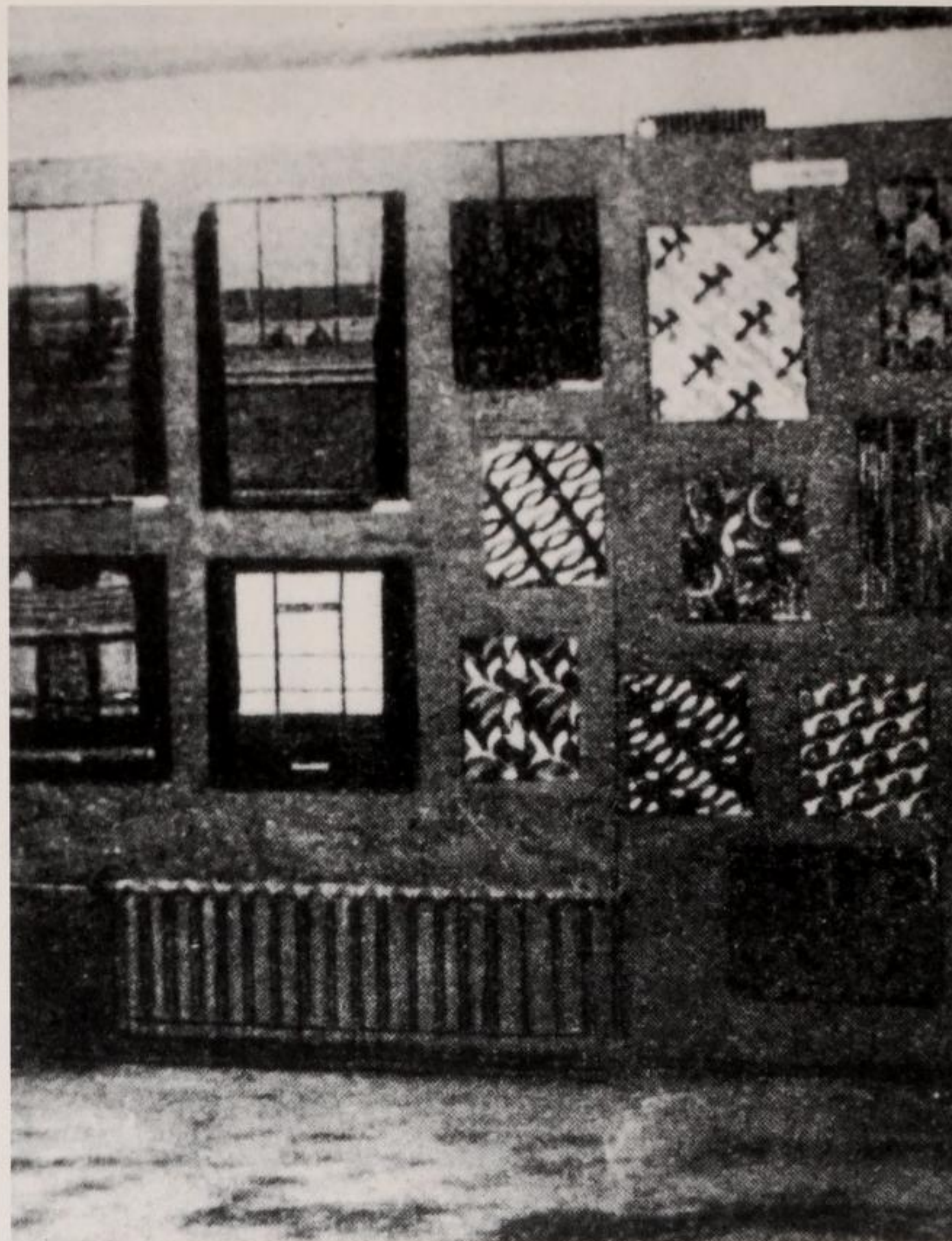


fig. 2
Vkhutein display at the Soviet Textiles for Daily Life exhibition, Moscow, 1928 (detail).

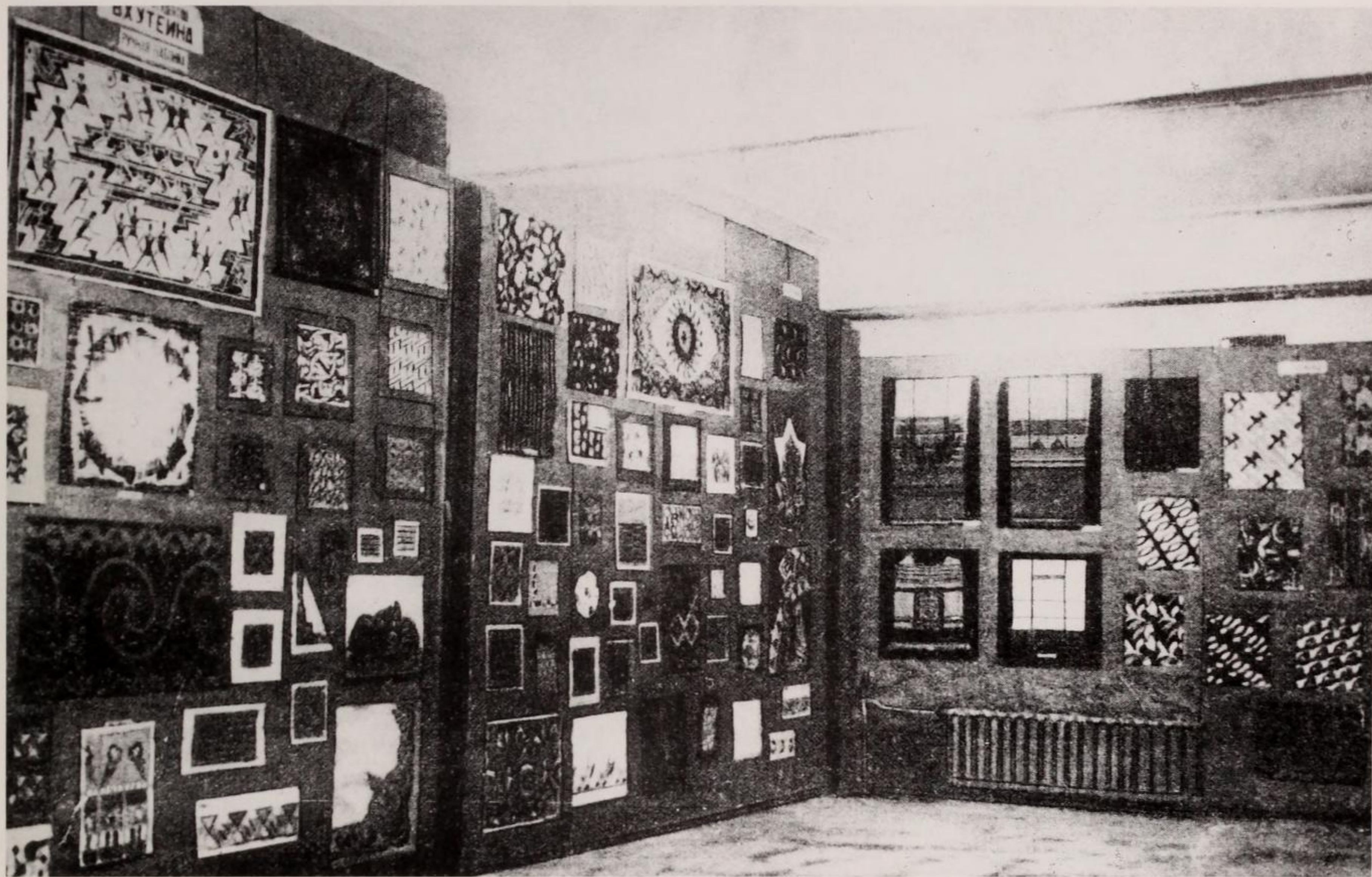


fig. 3
*Vkhutein display at the Soviet Textiles for Daily Life exhibition,
 Moscow, 1928.*

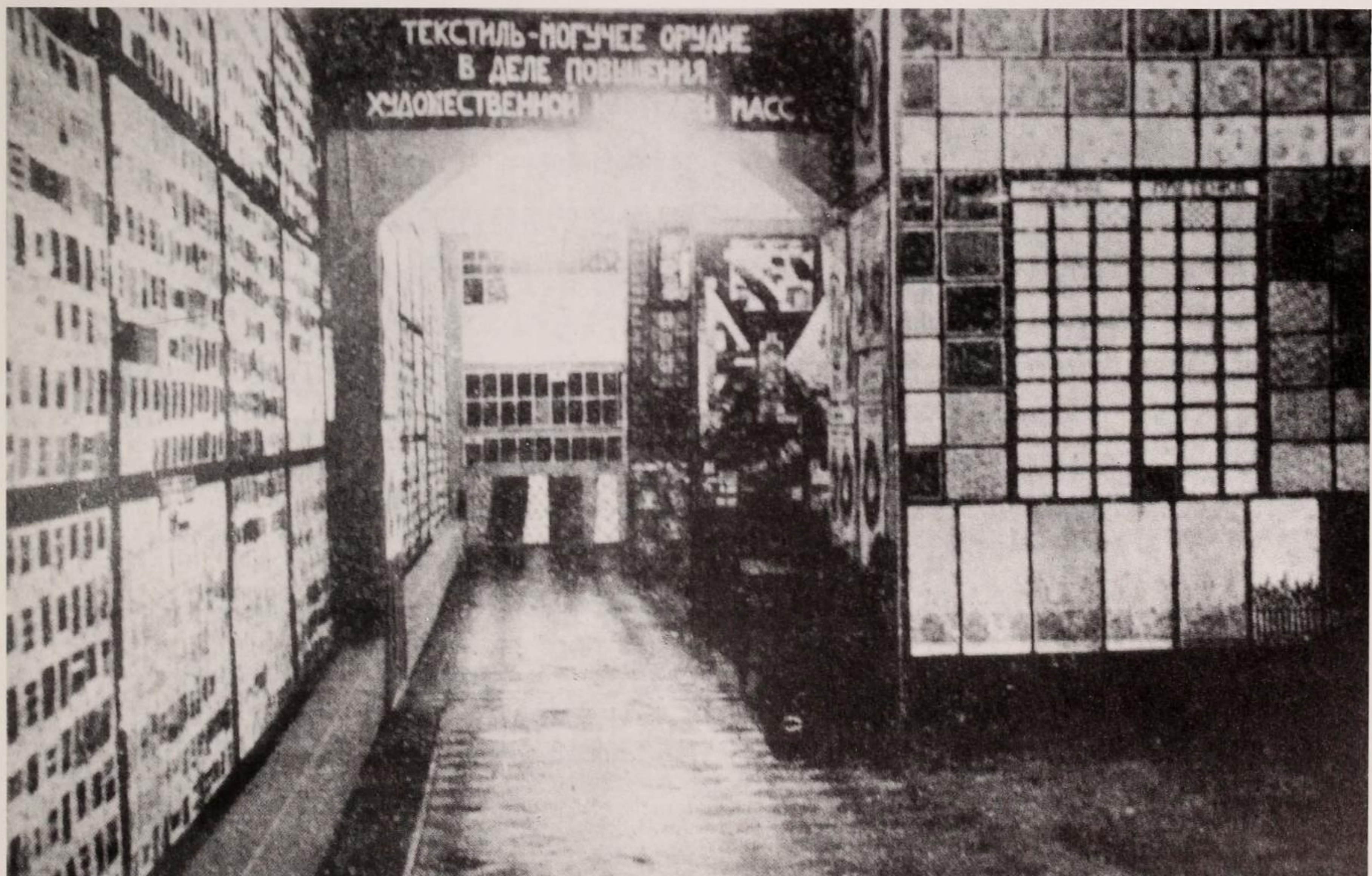
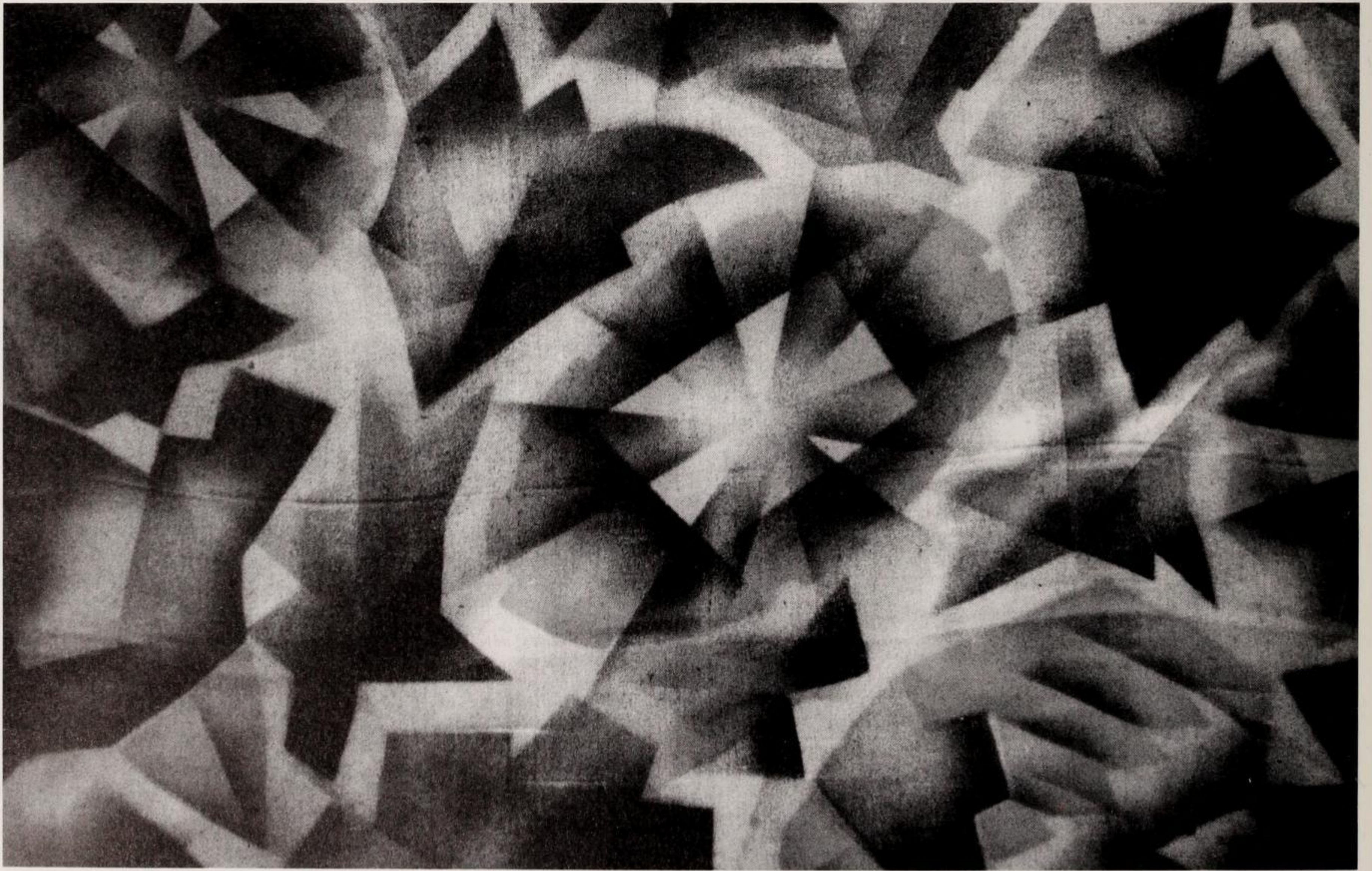
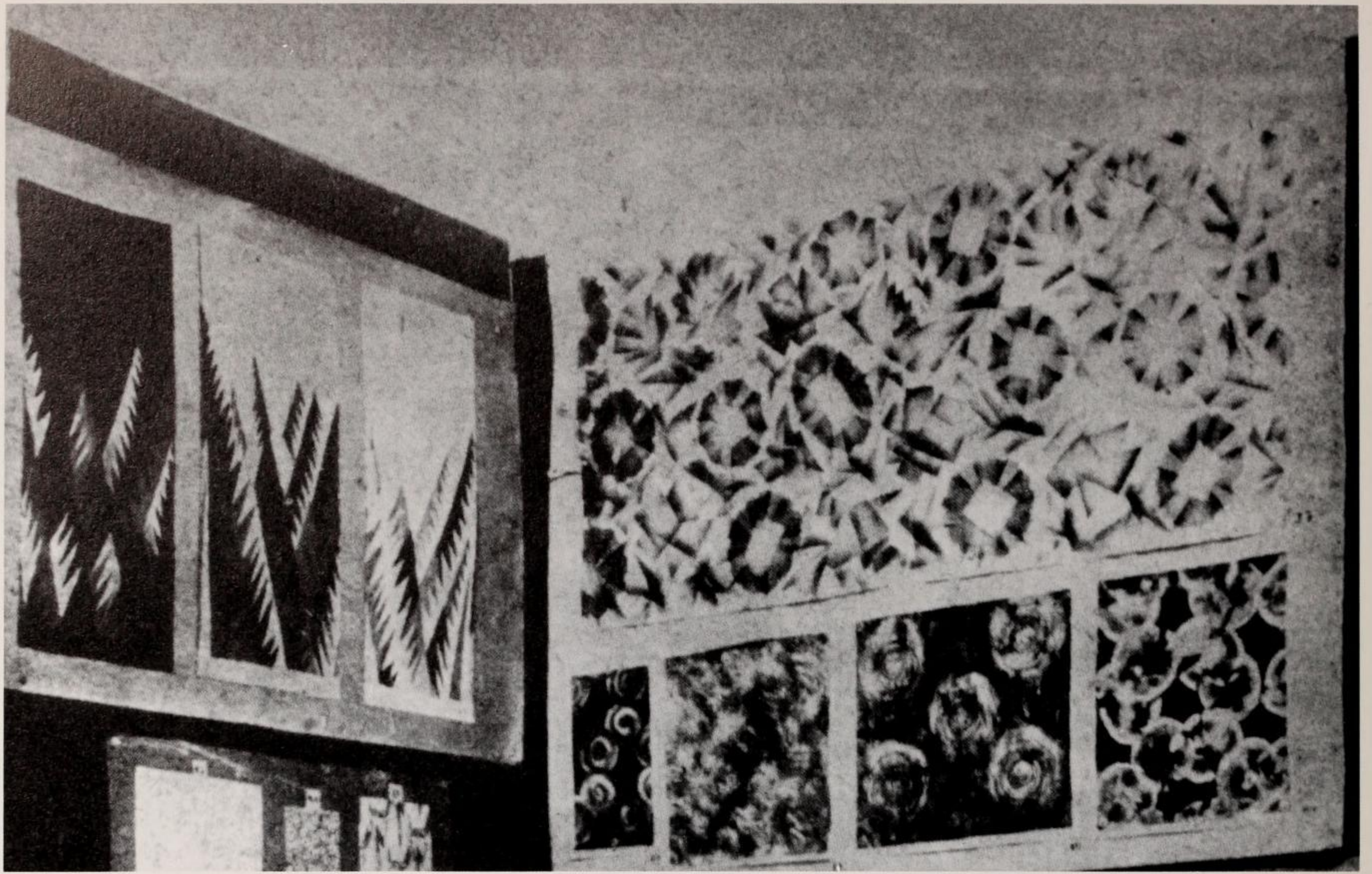


fig. 4
*Factory displays at the Soviet Textiles for Daily Life exhibition,
 Moscow, 1928.*



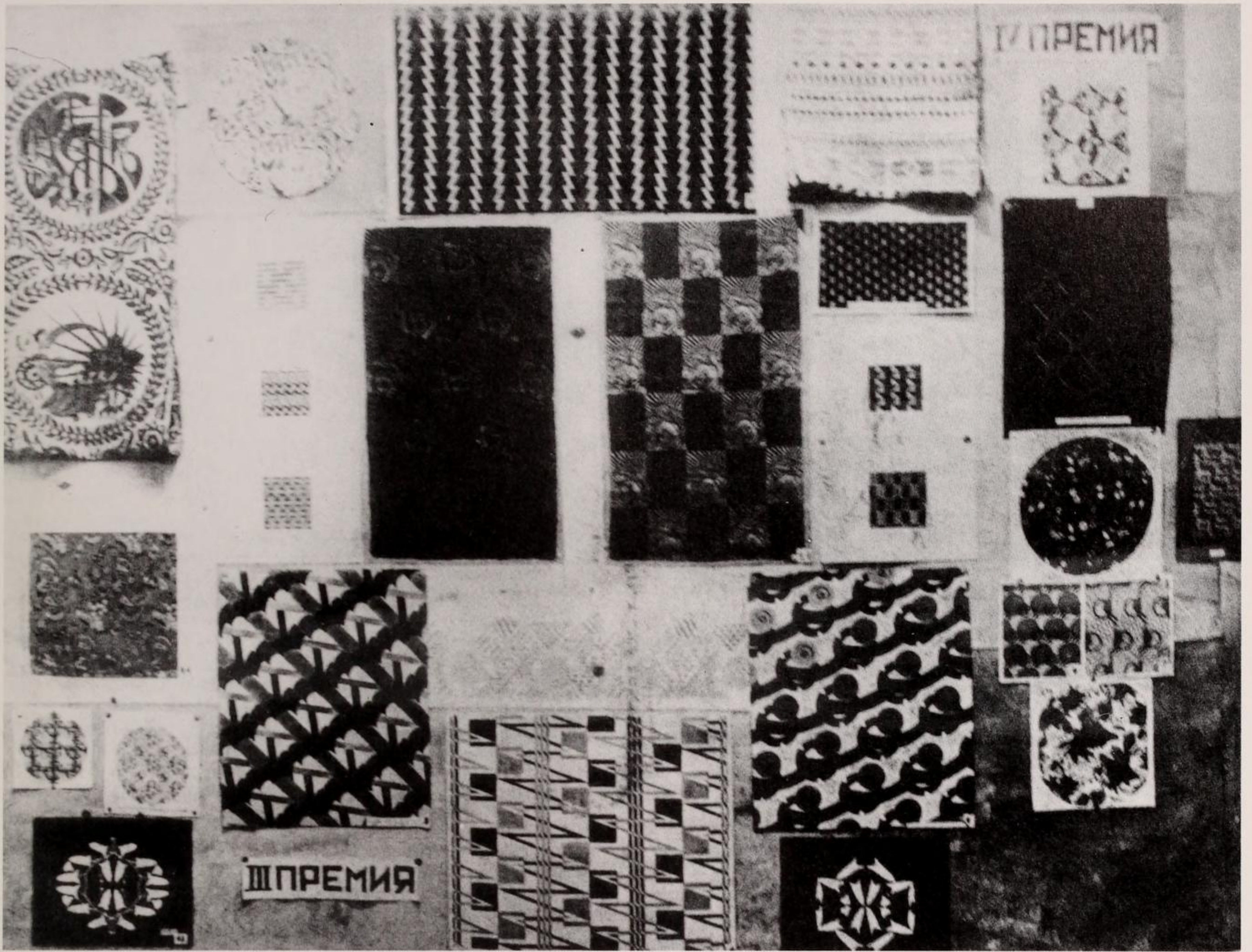


fig. 5
Displays by Shchuko (left) and Maiakovskaia (right) at the Soviet Textiles for Daily Life exhibition, Moscow, 1928.

fig. 6
*Liudmila Maiakovskaia
 Geometric, ca. 1927.
 Airbrush on silk, 54 x 40 cm.
 Maiakovskii Museum, Moscow.*

fig. 7
Third- and fourth-prize winners at the Soviet Textiles for Daily Life exhibition, Moscow, 1928.

with opposition for a number of reasons. Hard-currency resources were extremely scarce, and the subscriptions cost three thousand to four thousand gold rubles apiece.⁵ Relatively little fabric other than fabric for clothing was being produced, yet the subscription patterns were not suitable even for all types of this fabric; they offered nothing for workers' or peasants' dress fabric, for example, or for the export market.

A central design studio under the aegis of the Textile Syndicate would be more efficient, it was argued, and serve as a focus for the best of the country's designers. The studios attached to factories were considered both politically retrograde and of questionable skill, especially by the young designers who argued that people with an old, prerevolutionary mentality could not be trusted to create the bulk of the new designs for production. Removing the factory studios promised to eliminate the politically "backward" and troublesome artists of the factory studios, as well as to reduce the number of politically less desirable designs on the market. In early 1928, some saw a centralized studio as an opportunity to stop reproducing foreign designs altogether and to create more ideologically appropriate new designs.⁶ And in the event that Parisian designs were considered necessary after all, only one subscription would be needed.⁷

Members of the Textile Syndicate hesitated, arguing that the factory designers were also capable of creating original and appropriate designs. They spoke of making sure that *existing* designs were suitable for the type of cloth and were interesting, that the various regions were supplied with the proper types of fabric, and that any new designs be responsive primarily to the taste of consumers.⁸ Even so, it could be argued that, organized into a central studio with advice from industry representatives, factory artists might do even better.⁹

By 1928 the Vkhutein students had created a textile division within OMAKhr (the Young People's Section of the Association of Artists of the Revolution). The parent organization, AKhr, was a well-established, aggressively proselytizing group of middle-aged men, whose advocacy of popular and quasiproletarian themes in painting received solid financial and political support from the army and from labor organizations. It had been founded in 1922 in defense of easel painting in a naturalistic mode, and in bitter opposition to the notion of replacing painting with the industrial arts, as advocated by avant-garde groups. The idea of admitting fabric designers into the main organization can hardly have been received by older members with enthusiasm. But the young people's section was dominated by the energetic Vkhutein students, both men and women, who were committed to social proselytizing by means of mass-produced objects and who were adroit at political infighting.

Lacking an appropriate art-political organization to join after graduation, the OMAKhr students threatened and cajoled AKhr into accommodating their concerns in a major reorganization. Nor did they hesitate to lecture their older colleagues on their rigid approach to style, lest "the struggle against naked Formalism . . . turn into a struggle against formal investigations of a new content" and "content [be] understood as passively naturalistic, the purely contemplative perception of our epoch."¹⁰ In the fall of 1928, thirty-five members of OMAKhr joined AKhr, several assuming administrative positions. In the June 1929 OMAKhr exhibition, dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the Young Communists League, the textile artists exhibited thematic or agitational designs (fig. nos. 8–12)."

The *Soviet Textiles for Daily Life* exhibition in the winter of 1928–29 and the OMAKhr exhibition in the spring of 1929 inaugurated a heated debate throughout many organizations and the press that would last for the next three and a half years.



fig. 8
Anufrieva, Balloons, fabric design in OMAKhr exhibition, Moscow, 1929.

The young designers had, in some sense, taken up where the old avant-garde left off. From their teachers they had learned that the new Marxist country required an entirely new art, one invented and enforced by the artists, with support from above. But whereas the old avant-garde, under the influence of Lenin's early internationalist aspirations, had argued in favor of abstraction because of its classlessness, its lack of a specifically bourgeois history, the new designers, adopting the contemporary political viewpoint that looked to "revolution in one country," argued for a precisely *proletarian* art, an art that would strengthen the grip of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Neither group questioned the role of the artist or the necessity of enforcing an "official" art that was specific to the new economic organization of the country. Both generations of artists saw the design of everyday objects as a means of raising the political consciousness of the masses. In the new Soviet state, the "masses" meant, for the most part, an illiterate and superstitious peasantry and undisciplined workers of recent peasant extraction.

At the time of the June 1929 exhibition, Frida Roginskaia, an historian of textiles and an influential writer, urged the industry to accept the new agitational designs for more extensive production,¹² but, in fact, the few thematic designs that already had been produced had elicited very little enthusiasm on the part of consumers. There were those who would try to surmount this difficulty by broadening the artistic base of design work, attracting as many artists to it as possible, because "the attempt of textile artists to monopolize the right to design fabric is an unhealthy phenomenon."¹³ As time went on and consumers continued to avoid the new designs, the debates grew angry. Petr Rusin (Rusinov), artist, Party candidate, and head of the studio at the leading First Cotton-Printing Factory, declared unequivocally, "The market doesn't need your ideological art even for free!"¹⁴ The Textile Syndicate and the sales agents—who were considered the "market experts"¹⁵—were also hostile to the agitational designs. They saw their primary task as selling cloth, regardless of Marxist analyses of the content of its printed pattern, so as to supply a product badly needed by society and to strengthen the recovering textile industry.

The young designers, however, branded this outlook pure "market capitalism." The resistance on the part of consumers, they said—most notably, the deep desire for floral patterns—was precisely *proof* of the social necessity for the uplifting effect of the new themes. "Of all the objects of daily use, textiles most clearly reflect the ideology of the ruling class of the epoch in which they were created," and so "every textile design has a social origin," the AKhR group asserted, and plant forms clearly derived from the feudal epoch.¹⁶ Roginskaia agreed, but with somewhat less assurance. "The problem of plant ornament," she wrote, "is actually very complex—its solution is ahead of us." She disputed the opinion that "flowers always and for everyone are beautiful in the same way": "Actually, of course, this is not so . . . Naturally, plant ornament should have a large place in Soviet textile design, since a good part of the textiles goes to the peasantry. But it is also completely obvious that in an epoch of transition to collective agriculture, to methods of working the land using tractors and cultivators, to an era of building colossal collective farms, a design with plant elements must acquire a completely different character."¹⁷

Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, a prominent Marxist art historian and a representative of the Chief Art Administration, was chairman of the *Soviet Textiles for Daily Life* exhibition committee. Writing in the introduction to the catalogue, he characterized fabric as "ideological goods" with great potential, because "the millions of yards of fabric distributed yearly penetrate to the smallest corners and the furthest peoples of the



fig. 9
Daria Preobrazhenskaia
 Transportation, late 1920s–early 1930s.
 State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

country.”¹⁸ The thought that *everyone* had to wear clothes, and that they wore them for a great *length of time*, was particularly appealing to Fedorov-Davydov: “The pictures produced even by such mechanically reproduced figurative popular art as posters or postcards cannot be compared with the extent of distribution or the length and constancy of a dress’s or dish’s or piece of furniture’s action on the psychology of a person . . . An object’s design appeals directly to our emotions, often bypassing logical associations. It is perceived purely reflectively, and it is stamped on a person’s most fundamental psychological life and social behavior.”¹⁹

The new generation of textile artists, like many of the young activists who led the class war on other fronts, were both militant in their beliefs and consummate political organizers. Frustrated by the All-Union Textile Association’s reluctance to mandate the new designs and by the slow progress of the proposed central design studio, they had by the middle of 1929 succeeded in attaching to the Association an Art Council dominated by the AKhR artists and eventually headed by I. S. Perepelitsyn. Through this organ the AKhR textile artists gained ideological control of most of the designs that went into production throughout the country. New patterns produced by factory studios and other organizations were supposed to receive prior approval from the Council, which enforced rigid Marxist social and class criteria.²⁰ The Council saw its primary task as the removal of all designs that were “alien to the [proletarian] class, harmful, or neutral.”²¹ This powerful position occupied by the younger generation was further consolidated by the closing of Vkhutein in 1930 and the transfer of the Textiles Faculty to the Art Department of the Moscow Textile Institute, a department headed by one of their own, Mariia Nazarevskaia. The moderate opposition found itself open to the dangerous charge of opposing the Revolution and was increasingly on the defensive. The artist-activist Nadezhda Poluektova wrote in late 1930, “And if now it is not possible for those estranged elements to engage us in an open fight about principles, if one must not openly refuse to recognize the proletarian dictatorship, then there are other methods of fighting: lies, slander, double-dealing, deceit, sabotage—the classical methods of enemies and beloved methods of right and left opportunists.”²²

While debates about the efficacy and appropriateness of the new agitational designs raged on, the Art Council *acted*, conducting a thorough purge of the old designs. The Council swarmed through factory archives and studios, inspecting thousands of the old designs for ideological purity. Between late 1929 and the spring of 1931, Perepelitsyn’s organization destroyed some 24,000 textile drawings and designs—most of them floral—and ground the flowers off thousands of the metal rollers used for printing fabric.²³

Only about one out of three design proposals submitted to the Council passed the ideological test; there was no test for artistic quality. But even approved designs might be long kept from production, for they were apt to run into trouble with the workers in the factory studios who prepared the drawings for transfer to the rollers. Feeling injured by the raids made on their studio archives and libraries, their work supplanted by new “unpretty” drawings whose aesthetic quality they questioned, factory artists were likely to refuse to have anything to do with the new patterns. Thus the ideological screening by the Art Council acted as a persistent roadblock to the production of any fabric at all by the beleaguered industry. Yet any attempt by the factories to modify or circumvent the Council’s policies brought on vociferous public charges by the fundamentalists of anti-Marxism and anti-Bolshevism. The result was a stalemate; by 1931 there was a persistent shortage of fabric and no means to rectify the situation in the foreseeable future.

In an attempt to better organize the industry and to revise the Art Council, redirecting its activities to more productive work, a conference on the topic “What Soviet Textile Design Should Be” was called in the spring of 1931 under the auspices of the newspaper of the Textile Workers Union, *Golos tekstilei* (*The Textiles’ Voice*). It was attended by artists, factory artists, union workers, industry and sales representatives, and members of the Textile Association and educational institutions. The meeting began on a practical and ideologically moderate level. The keynote speech was given by David Arkin from the Academy of Artistic Sciences, who took a view considerably different from that which had been expressed by Fedorov-Davydov. Arkin maintained that it was a mistake to consider fabric similar to posters or other agitational art, because, unlike them, clothing is meant to be seen for a long time and will eventually simply bore the wearer with its social message: “From the very beginning we made mistakes when we began to produce theme designs. We approached the textile or fabric just like the poster and the picture, without taking into account its particularities and the application of each kind [of design]—for clothing, furniture, the table, the bed, and so forth. The full-scale thematic design presupposes, as a rule, the human figure (it is hard to imagine our Soviet themes in developed form without [the depiction of] a person). *Such full-scale thematic design for clothing and dress fabric should be rejected.*”²⁴

Nevertheless, in support of continued innovation in the development of proletarian designs, Arkin approved of the recent appearance of motifs “based on an emblem, either of the Soviet government—the hammer and sickle—or of industrial or collective-farm labor, all kinds of factory motifs, machine parts, production equipment, etc.” (fig. no. 13, plate no. 567). But even in approving emblems as a motif Arkin was understandably nervous about the Art Council’s tendency to extremes, and cautioned that such designs must remain “unobtrusive”: “A great quantity of examples can be given where the separate elements of machines—for example, gears, pincers, tools—are depicted on the fabric. These tools or pieces of machines are depicted so that they are not essentially emblems, but illustrate the tendency of many artists and whole trends to elevate machine forms into fetishes or idols [plate no. 569]. This elevation of machine parts into some kind of divinity is not a proletarian approach to the machine.”²⁵

The Art Council came in for bitter criticism at the conference. A delegate from the Central Union sales agency called it a “living corpse,” and even Roginskaia reproved it for “splitting hairs.”²⁶ It was criticized for not assuming any real responsibility for the development of designs or for their general quality. It was also reproved for doing nothing to educate factory artists politically or to address any of the wider ideological issues.²⁷

The apparent lack of enthusiasm for the new designs on the part of consumers was a major problem. In this era of forced collectivization the peasantry and agricultural workers were apt to regard the designs as yet another cruel joke perpetrated by the urban bureaucracy. Yet many artists and theorists found it impossible to believe that the tastes of workers and peasants did not in fact correspond to their social class, and that changing a person’s preferences in printed cloth was not simply a matter of raising class consciousness. Fedorov-Davydov in his introduction to the *Soviet Textiles for Daily Life* catalogue had relied upon the masses to defend against a purely market approach to design: “Given the enormous cultural and political significance of the artistic side of the textile . . . we can’t just leave the business of its artistic composition to the blind action of the market; we can’t consider it only an economic problem. We have to attract social attention to this question, to interest

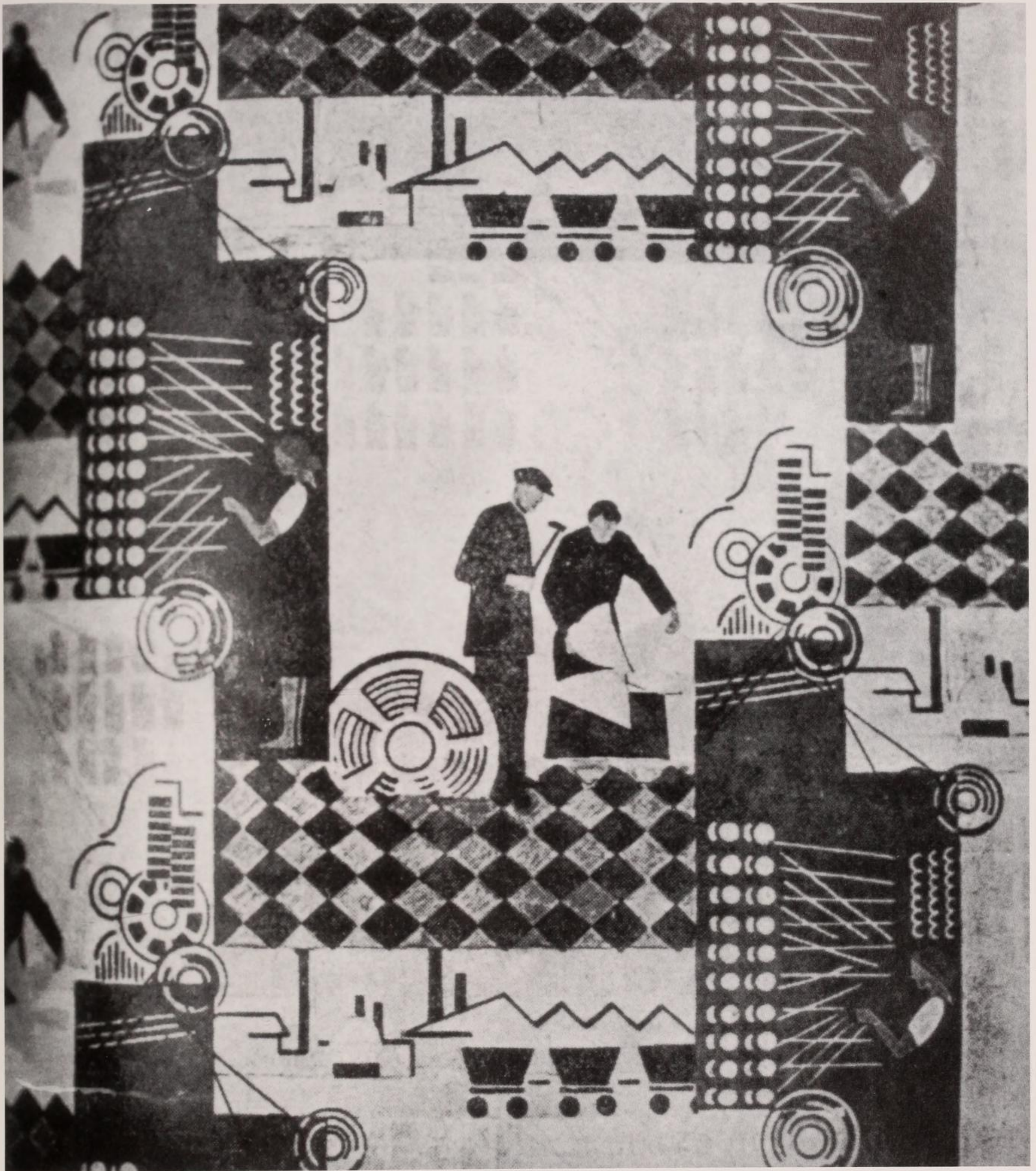


fig. 10
*Nikitina, The Komsomol in Production, fabric design in
OMAKbR exhibition, Moscow, 1929.*

our masses in it, to bring them nearer to an understanding of and an active influence on the art of the textile."²⁸ But after three years, sales records still showed that consumers, especially in the rural areas, persisted in responding more favorably to floral designs than to the new social motifs. At the conference Arkin, an aesthetic moderate who energetically opposed excessively industrial and figurative motifs on fabric, still could not bring himself to admit that buyers might recognize what was best for them. It was necessary to "study the demand of the genuine mass consumer," he told his audience, "but we mustn't go too far in this direction—[believing] that everything the consumer likes is law."²⁹ Roginskaia, too, tried to reconcile contradictions by implying that the wrong consumers had been consulted: "We must orient ourselves to the organized consumers, and among them to the consumer in the most advanced ranks, the shock worker among collective farmers and laborers."³⁰

Far from everyone at the conference was enamored of the representational designs. The designers of weaving, although mentioned from time to time by AKhR interests, seemed to have changed little since the 1928 exhibition and simply to have ignored ideological requirements. Artists with impeccable proletarian credentials, such as the designers from the Red Rose silk factory, put up public resistance to representation. Without mincing words, Chachkhiani, herself a graduate of Vkhutein, asserted: "[In dress fabric] thematic designs are impossible . . . It is unthinkable to introduce the human face, the tractor, the factory. It is simply uncivilized."³¹

Maiakovskaia, a revolutionary for more than twenty years, defended her nonrepresentational designs: "Primarily a classical type of design (stripes, spots, rings) is needed now on silk. The fabric is expensive; buyers can't make several silk dresses. They will select a neutral design, one that neither bores them nor hits them in the eye." She used thematic designs on scarves, she said, and in the future might use them for linings. Like several others, she sought to consolidate her position through organization and demanded a special "silk section" of the Art Council to address the special problems of this fabric.³²

In spite of the statement in the concluding document of the conference that the Art Council, as it exists, "to all intents and purposes has exercised no responsibility for the artistic side of fabric design and hasn't had any effect on production, has not organized social opinion around the quality of the textile drawing, and should be immediately eliminated," this document actually expanded rather than limited the Council's powers. It was recommended that the Art Council extend its activities to the whole art side of the textile industry, that it add an executive committee to oversee the daily running of its activities, that it organize separate sections to administer different types of fabric, and that it conduct reeducation work among factory artists. The conference also went on record in favor of moving quickly toward the central design studios, advocated greater control of weaving, silk, and piece goods, and proposed research laboratories under the Council's supervision to "verify new drawings with the organized consumer."³³

During the meeting, proponents of the agitational motifs overwhelmed all contrary opinion. More moderate forces were unable to withstand the onslaught of these young people, whose opinions were composed of a classical mixture of patriotism, class hatred, and implicit faith in a scientific theory. Although factory representatives and sales agents signed the concluding document, their opinions were not represented in it. The AKhR group backed down slightly on the question of the figurative motifs for dress fabric, but they reasserted their importance on fabric for every other type of use: "The conference considers that the basis of {the new} design is the



fig. II
Zotov, Transportation, *fabric design in OMAKbR exhibition, Moscow, 1929.*

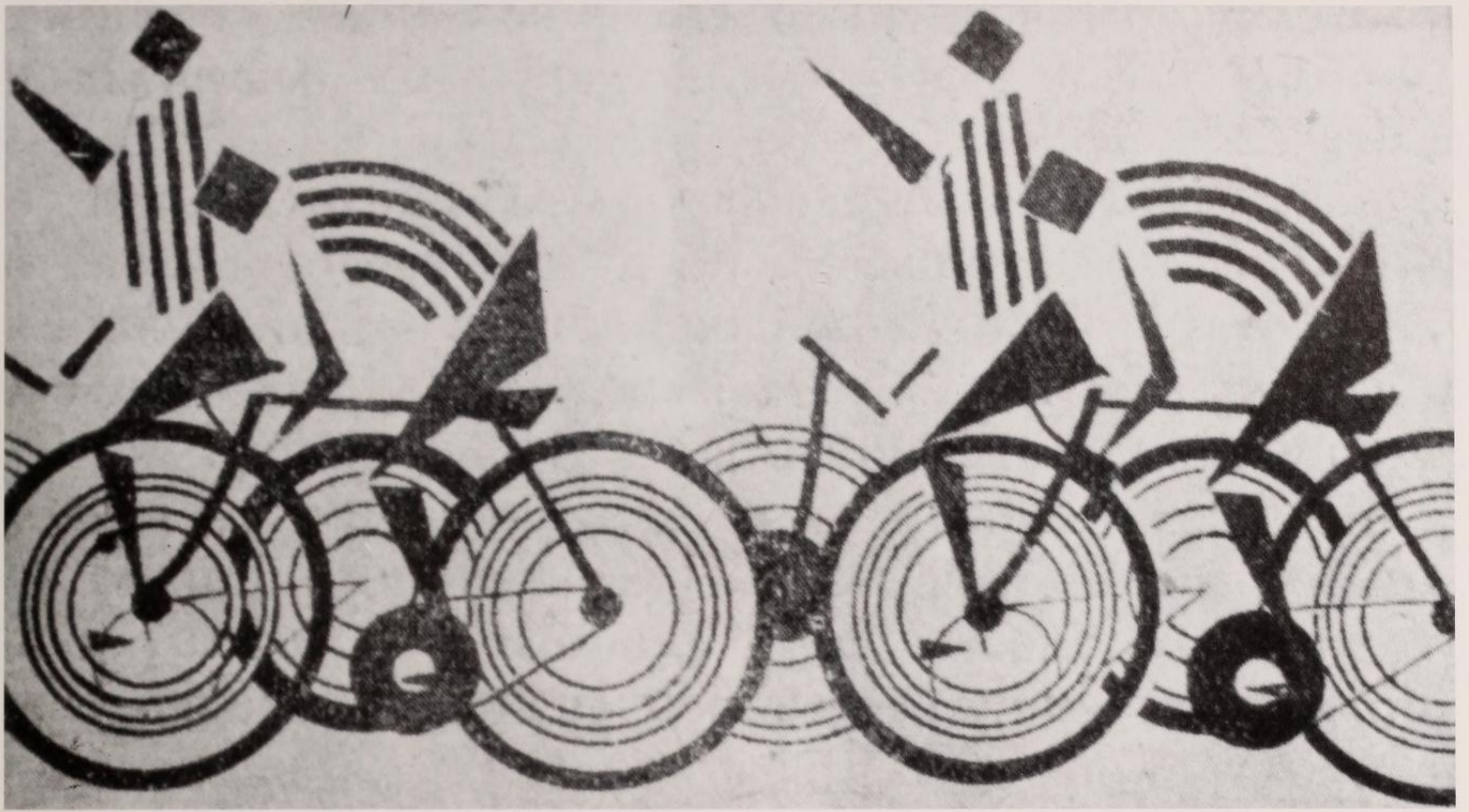


fig. 12
Grigorovich, Bikers, fabric design in OMAKbR exhibition, Moscow, 1929.

development of socially significant themes . . . If in the assortment for dresses these should be primarily ornamental or emblematic, then in decorative and piece goods the problem of the fully developed theme should be at the center of attention."³⁴

Ultimately the conference had little effect on the AKhR designers. As if in direct defiance of Arkin's prescriptions, Nazarevskaia designed a new dress fabric with not one but many human figures—peasants helped by Red Army soldiers—picking cotton (plate no. 594). But with the onset of the Second Five-Year Plan, the country moved back to ideals that included bourgeois comforts, and the Communist Party intervened to bring the quarreling and the production of agitational designs to a halt.

On October 6, 1933, *Pravda* carried a witty but ominous article on dress fabric entitled "A Tractor in Front, A Combine Behind":

Now here is a new bright little chintz. No little flowers on it—that's petit-bourgeois. No little stripes—that's creeping Empire style. No little checks—that's an echo of feudalism. This fabric has big tractors and big combines printed on it . . .

If you want to acquaint the backward inhabitants of the city with life in the new collectivized village, don't write any articles, don't deliver any lectures. Best of all, deck yourself out in a dress of this here fabric. A multicolored picture. A very complex composition.

The big new building of the rural cooperative with a huge sign. At the entry of the cooperative there are . . . horses harnessed to a wagon.

But an exterior view alone won't do. And right here even what is going on inside the store is shown. Peasant men and women crowd at the counter. A bearded clerk sells goods. To limit oneself to just the coop building means not to present an ideologically consistent dress.

The article singles out Perepelitsyn as head of the Art Council and, employing her own brand of innuendo, turns the tables on her:

These are very "left" kids. Every drawing that is artistic yet simple, without any flourishes, they label counterrevolutionary . . . A bunch of hacks and scum, wrapping themselves in pseudorevolutionary phrases, they have sullied our fabric . . . or were there indeed some class enemies, wielding "artistic" brushes, who tried to mock us with chintz and cotton?³⁵

Two months later, in December, the Council of People's Commissars issued a Resolution on the Inadmissibility of the Goods Produced by a Number of Fabric Enterprises Using Poor and Inappropriate Designs.³⁶ This time the rebuke was effective. Not one more agitational pattern was produced. Within a few months Nazarevskaia had created a new—floral—design (fig. no. 14), and in Russia avant-garde fabric design had come to an end.

The history of fabric decoration in the late 1920s and early 1930s demonstrates social and organizational trends that are typical of this period in the Soviet Union. The desire to enforce greater ideological control in a complex area compounded of personal taste, industrial development, and political theory set up a movement toward even greater centralization. But in the area of textiles, ideology was not the only motivation for centralization. Problems of efficiency, economy, and artistic quality—issues not of stated interest to the young activists—were similarly to be resolved by larger and more complex bureaucracies. The need for uniform political-aesthetic criteria, an idea inherited from the previous generation of avant-garde artists, went unquestioned. In spite of the fact that the AKhR textile artists repeatedly maintained that political content was the sole aspect important in design, their commitment to



fig. 13

I. I. Mitiaev

The Five-Year Plan in Four Years, *late 1920s–1931.*
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

matters of form and composition—another legacy from the previous generation—is obvious from their work and from their objection to the limp naturalism of many of their colleagues in AKhR. In the end, the attempt to gain control of a seemingly intractable social situation and a fanatical belief in the correctness of their critical theory led the new artistic elite to make impossible demands on human nature, thus setting the stage for their own demise.



fig. 14
Mariia Nazarevskaia
Textile design, 1934.

Notes

1. The catalogue, *Pervaia khudozbestvennaia vystavka "Bytovoii sovetskii tekstil'"* (Moscow: Glaviskusstvo, 1928), lists thirty-four fabric designers and seventeen weaving students from Vkhutein.
2. N. N. Sobolev, "Itogi vystavki 'Bytovoii sovetskii tekstil,'" *Izvestiia tekstil'noi promyshlennosti i torgovli* 6 (1929), pp. III–12.
3. N. N. Sobolev, "Vystavka 'Bytovoii sovetskii tekstil,'" *Izvestiia tekstil'noi promyshlennosti i torgovli* 2 (1929), p. 57.
4. A. S. Kudriavtsev, "O tsentral'noi masterskoi po sozdaniiu risunka dlia tkani," *Izvestiia tekstil'noi promyshlennosti i torgovli* 6 (1928), p. 65.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 66.
7. Ibid., pp. 65–66.
8. A. Lobachev, "Problema sozdaniia risunka dlia tkanei," *Izvestiia tekstil'noi promyshlennosti i torgovli* 9 (1928), pp. 73–74.
9. Ibid., p. 74.
10. I. Matsa, ed., *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let. Materialy i dokumentatsiia* (Moscow and Leningrad: Ogiz-Izogiz, 1933), p. 381.
11. Anufrieva, Mitiaev, Nazarevskaia, Chachkhiani, and other textile students had taken part in the first OMAKhr exhibition in the spring of 1928. There was no designated topic for this show, however, and many of the designs exhibited were not clearly agitational.
12. F. S. Roginskaia, "Rost khudozhestvennoi smeny v tekstile," *Izvestiia tekstil'noi promyshlennosti torgovli* 7–8 (1929), p. 94.
13. "'Bytovoii sovetskii tekstil,'" *Iskusstvo v massy* 1–2 (1929), pp. 36–37.
14. Quoted in [Nadezhda] Poluektova in "Bor'ba za sovetskii tekstil'," *Za proletarskoe iskusstvo* 2 (1931), p. 21.
15. *Torgovedy*—sales agents who were responsible for various districts and with whom local merchants placed their orders. They were familiar with local populations, their needs and tastes in fabric, and were consulted by the factories and trusts concerning the popularity of specific designs and the needs of the provinces. In fact, in the late twenties they formed the only group of professional "market consultants" in the textile industry.
16. "'Bytovoii sovetskii tekstil,'" p. 35.
17. Roginskaia, "Rost khudozhestvennoi smeny v tekstile," pp. 91–92.
18. [Aleksei] Fedorov-Davydov, "Smysl i zadacha vystavki," *Pervaia khudozbestvennaia vystavka "Bytovoii sovetskii tekstil,'" p. 4.*
19. Ibid., p. 3.
20. In practice, a few orders for piece goods were still placed with individual artists, thus bypassing the Council.
21. Poluektova, "Bor'ba za sovetskii tekstil'," p. 20.
22. Ibid. Poluektova's revolutionary credentials were impeccable. At Vkhutemas she had roomed with Varvara Armand, the daughter of the famous Inessa Armand. There, on February 25, 1921, they had entertained Lenin and Nadezhda Krupskaiia.
23. I. S. Perepelitsyn, "Tvorcheskoi raboty ne bylo v khudozhestvennom biuro," *Golos tekstilei*, March 25, 1931, p. 3.
24. David Arkin, "Risunok—neotemlemaia chast' kachestva tkani," *Golos tekstilei*, March 24, 1931, p. 3.
25. Ibid.
26. Fadeev, "Nikto ne izuchaet zaprosov potrebitelia," *Golos tekstilei*, March 25, 1931, p. 3. [Frida] Roginskaia, "Provesti v zhizn' teoreticheskie ustanovki," *Golos tekstilei*, March 25, 1931, p. 3.
27. "Kachestvo tekstilia zavisit i ot risunka," *Golos tekstilei*, March 27, 1931, p. 3.
28. Fedorov-Davydov, "Smysl i zadacha vystavki," p. 7.
29. Arkin, "Risunok—neotemlemaia chast' kachestva tkani," p. 3. The emphasis by Arkin and others on the "genuine" mass consumer reflects the current effort supported by the Party to explain seeming contradictions between life and theory by making further, often spurious, class distinctions among the rural population.
30. Roginskaia, "Provesti v zhizn' teoreticheskie ustanovki," p. 3.
31. [Tat'iana] Chachkhiani, "Iz koleza i shesterni delaiut . . . tsvetochki," *Golos tekstilei*, March 25, 1931, p. 3.
32. L. Maiakovskaia, "Risunok na shelke imeet svoi osobyie zadachi," *Golos tekstilei*, March 25, 1931, p. 3.
33. "Kachestvo tekstilia zavisit i ot risunka," p. 3.
34. Ibid.
35. G. Ryklin, "Speredi traktor, szadi kombain," *Pravda*, October 6, 1933, p. 4.
36. "O rabote khlopochato-bumazhnoi promyshlennosti," *Izvestiia* 5237 (December 18, 1933), p. 3.

The Great Utopia

*The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde,
1915–1932*

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

State Tret'iakov Gallery

State Russian Museum

Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

G U G G E N H E I M M U S E U M

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*Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman
in Two Dimensions)*, 1915
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

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