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Anti-kitsch, or how to make a socialist doily: DIY, folk art, and "open" materialities in late-socialist Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the promotion of amateur "folk art" production in the Slovak Normalization-era, lifestyle magazines Dorka and Linia. Scholarship on socialist-era DIY, consumption, and material culture shows that socialist modernity was characterized by a culture of making and repair which relied on the knowledge, skill, and labour of citizens. I argue that the amateur production of "folk art" was an integral part of this culture in late-socialist Slovakia, forming a specific type of material practice which deserves to be studied in its own right. Focusing on projects of vernacular embroidery in Dorka and Linia, I show how the Normalization-era authorities promoted the physical recreation of vernacular culture as an ideologically correct way of incorporating pre-socialist rural traditions into modern socialist interiors and lifestyles. Such projects constituted a type of socialist "aesthetic education," teaching women how to distinguish "good taste" from kitsch. This official valorization of amateur "folk art" production was accompanied by a particular idea of gendered citizenship, and broader ideological lessons in materialist thinking which encourage socialist citizens to engage in the self-conscious creation of their material environment.

KEYWORDS

DIY; folk art; kitsch; materiality; normalization; Slovakia

Introduction

The Dorka magazine represented good taste in its time. It wanted to be an opposition to kitsch. It was a guide for women on how to build a cosy, tasteful home, dress themselves and their families in a modern and tasteful way, entertain their children with tasteful toys, and entertain themselves with crocheting, knitting and all kinds of activities with cloth, cotton and scraps. [. . .] Yet, or perhaps precisely because of this, Dorka's aesthetic postulate appears very bizarre today. [. . .] The wall decorations and patterns are influenced by the tail of chewed-up, dead modernism, lace and embroidery ring with the clumsy echoes of folk art, transplanted to the urban environment of the 1970s and 1980s – could it be a kind of peculiar mutation of the national style?

Vít Soukup, "Dorka," Umělec (2003/1)

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In the early 2000s, Czech visual artist Vít Soukup created two series of paintings inspired by the visual world of the Slovak socialist-era lifestyle magazine, Dorka. Focusing on the banal objects and handicrafts of the 1970s socialist domesticity, Soukup's paintings approached the aesthetics of the socialist past with both compassion and irony; his works shed light on the communist authorities' attempts to use amateur "folk art" and DIY projects to introduce modernist ideas of beauty and taste into quotidian life. On the pages of Dorka, he wrote, the "visual conquests of Malevich, Matisse, or Kupka" were turned into "crocheted blankets" and "textile applications" to be made and displayed at home (2003).

In this article, I investigate the ideological roots of this normalization-era "national style" as it appeared on the pages of two Slovak-language lifestyle magazines, Dorka and Linia. After 1968, these magazines became an important medium through which the (Czecho-)Slovak public was socialized into socialist consumers, showcasing contemporary styles of interior décor and communicating official parameters of "good taste." A key aspect of this "aesthetic education" was giving men and women the ideas and instructions to alter or create their own clothing, furniture, and decorative objects. Another was teaching readers about the value of vernacular ("folk") arts and crafts, and their rightful place in the modern, socialist interior. Readers of Dorka and Linia were encouraged not only to purchase and display items made by Slovak craft collectives but also to turn their hand at traditional textile techniques (for women) or woodwork (for men). Focusing in particular on the ways in which projects of vernacular embroidery were framed in Dorka and Linia, I show how the Normalization-era authorities linked this production of amateur arts with notions of productive leisure and civic engagement and posited the physical re-creation of vernacular culture as an ideologically correct way of re-appropriating national traditions. Putting the act of *making* at the centre of socialist aesthetics and ethics, I argue, amateur "folk art" became an important medium for broader ideological lessons in Marxist materialist thinking.

Studies of the socialist-era production of "folk arts" in Central and Eastern Europe have tended to focus on professionals and institutional histories, highlighting the economic organization and political appropriation of vernacular culture by communist regimes (Klekot 2021; Korduba 2013; Mešša 2007). By shedding light on the parallel production of amateur "folk art" by non-specialists, I want to shift scholarly attention to the role vernacular culture played in the construction of socialist popular culture in the post-War period. Rather than simply dismissing it as an "inauthentic" derivative of historical rural traditions, I suggest that amateur "folk art" should be approached as a specific type of material culture (and material practice) which deserves to be studied in its own right. Taking a first step in this direction, I extend ideas about the relationship between material culture, personhood, and society developed by scholars of socialist-era DIY culture to the study of vernacular creativity and its direction by the Normalization-era authorities. Recent scholarship has shown that socialist modernity was characterized by an "unfinished" or "open" material world which required the knowledge, skills, and labour of citizens to operate (Golubev 2020; Vasilyeva 2019). The production of amateur "folk art" formed part of this wider culture of making and repair, engaging the creative energies and skills of citizens. Unlike more conventional forms of DIY, however, it articulated existing tensions between the self-proclaimed humanism of socialist society and the rationalism of industrial and scientific progress.

My material comes primarily from the two monthly Slovak-language lifestyle magazines Dorka and Linia. Dorka (*Dobre rady pre každeho* – Good Advice for Everyone) was first published in 1965 by *Živena*, the publishing house of the Slovak division of the Czechoslovak Union of Women. Every issue contained various sewing and needlecraft projects (embroidery, lace making, knitting, sewing, crocheting, and other decorative techniques) and to a smaller degree recipes and practical advice about hygiene and correct food storage. Linia (The Line) was published by the Ministry of Commerce from 1968. Subtitled the "*magazine for aesthetics of living environment*," Linia addressed Slovaks as consumers: this was the place where new designs in furnishings, textiles, and consumer goods (from fashionable clothing to fridges) were presented to the public. While Dorka primarily addressed women, Linia had sections for all members of the family, children included.[1] I also draw on a number of Normalization-era volumes on aesthetics, ethics, and architecture which were written by academics and/or design professionals, but targeted at a general audience (Hanzlíková 1977; Novikovová 1978; Szabó 1982; Zemko and Zemková 1981). Close reading of these volumes allows for a more direct analysis of the way in which key ideological messages about aesthetics, creativity, and historical materialism were transmitted to the Slovak public. Combining these sources allows for a clearer view of how the didactic material and prescriptive language found in Dorka and Linia reflected ideologically approved ideas of creativity, labour, and taste.

DIY, kitsch, and "open materialities"

Scholars of DIY activity and its post-War history have often approached it as a democratizing force which challenged design edicts, the stigma of manual labour, and reinforced norms of frugality (while fuelling competitive consumption) (Atkinson 2006). In the Euro-American context, DIY – as material practice and as a commercial market – emerged with rising levels of homeownership and the commercialization of home improvement as a leisure activity (Kreis 2020). Gendered practices of home maintenance and decoration allowed men and women to both participate in consumer culture and maintain a sense of productive autonomy and self-identity (Kreis 2020). DIY aesthetics and practices were also adopted by counter-cultural elements in society, becoming the hallmark of punk culture and environmental, feminist, and political activism (Quintela and Guerra 2019; Ratto and Boler 2014). Themes of moral economy, gendered subjectivity, and counter-cultural self-expression also feature prominently in work on DIY culture in the former Eastern Bloc. Behind the Iron Curtain, DIY also formed an important part of mainstream and fringe musical and artistic subcultures (Bartlett 2013; Šima 2021; Zubak 2016). Above all, it was an element of the ubiquitous practices of making, repairing, and recycling which formed part of socialist domesticity (Gerasimova and Chuikina 2009; Kreis 2018). From Prague to Tashkent, socialist citizens made everything from furniture to tractors, seeking to compensate for the failures of the planned economy (Fehérváry 2013; Makovicky 2018; Reid 2014). Indeed, DIY activities were such a widespread feature of these societies that they are now sometimes considered a national characteristic (Caldwell 2004; Gibas and Nyklova 2020).

DIY was, in short, a way citizens on *both* sides of the Iron Curtain enacted gendered subjectivities, expressed individual creativity, and domesticated post-War modernity. Indeed, as a number of authors have already shown, DIY activities fulfilled an important

(if often overlooked) role in the ideological construction and practical realization of socialist modernity. Communist regimes actively encouraged the inclusion of DIY practices and skills into compulsory education and state-regulated leisure activities (Golubev and Smolyak 2013). They presented the making, repairing, and reusing of materials and commodities as part of a healthy, socialist attitude to the environment, as well as a route to self-actualization through the transformation of the material world (Gille 2007; Kreis 2018; Reid 2014). As Zinaida Vasilyeva (2019) has argued, socialist societies were characterized by an openness of technological know-how and the production of "open box" and "unfinished" commodities which could be adapted and repaired (also Gerasimova and Chuikina 2009). Scientific, technological, and practical knowledge not only remained uncommodified but was shared with the public through magazines and books on sewing, amateur engineering, model building, domestic repairs, and furniture construction (Golubev 2020). This meant that technical and "traditional" skills – including textile crafts – retained a certain moral and ideological value and were part of the official vision of an enlightened, rational socialist subject (Golubev 2020; Vasilyeva 2019). Indeed, while DIY activities were often a pragmatic response to shortages, they were also an ideologically sanctioned form of popular agency on which the authorities could draw to help complete large-scale, industrial projects of the state (Reid 2014).

Official discourses on DIY in Czechoslovakia shared this vision of the socialist citizen as *homo faber* – that is, as a creative individual in pursuit of skilled mastery over their environment. While practices of bricolage and "making do" were a fixture of post-War everyday life, socialist DIY really came into its own during the post-1968 Normalization period (Gibas and Nyklova 2020). After the upheaval of the Prague Spring, Czechoslovak authorities introduced a five-day work week and encouraged citizens to embrace a "quiet life" dedicated to their families and hobbies (Bren 2011). As men and women spent more time and resources on home improvements, summer cottages, gardening, and outdoor activities, the regime publicly supported a flourishing DIY culture. Magazines, such as Udělej – Urob si sám (Do It Yourself), Chatař (The Cottager), and Domov (The Home), supplied citizens with advice not only on how to decorate, repair, and maintain homes and cottages but also on how to construct household appliances, gardening equipment, and motor vehicles. Women who wanted to dress their families according to the latest fashions could find patterns for clothing, knitwear, and decorative textiles in Praktická žena (The Practical Woman), Žena a móda (Woman and Fashion), Móda (Fashion), and Ateliér Květen (Studio "May"). Driven partly by the lack of attractive, good-quality clothes, sewing and knitting allowed them to exercise some agency over the dull, standardized clothes offered by the socialist regime (Kořínková 2015). Indeed, as the Czechoslovak state failed to deliver on its promise of ever-increasing living standards, DIY became a way people could fulfil their frustrated consumer desires.

The material world portrayed in DIY magazines such as Udělej – Urob si sám and Praktická žena, in short, was one in which mass consumption did not necessarily equal mass production. Rather, it was a world in which citizens played the role of amateur artist, craftsman, and engineer in order to create the comforts of socialist modernity with their own hands. Studying late-Soviet DIY magazines, Golubev and Smolyak (2013) note that these publications created certain patterns of subjectivation, presenting the "ability to make nice, stylish and reliable things" as a "social norm" and "marker of positive identification" against which Soviet citizens were invited to judge themselves and their peers

(Golubev and Smolyak 2013, 520). These normative discourses on DIY also established an important distinction between a "socialist" culture of objects and a "capitalist" culture of commodities: the former consisted of practices of rational consumption and creative substitution which extended the life cycle of things and materials, the latter supposedly encouraged acquisitiveness, social competition, and the "passive" consumption of manufactured goods (Golubev and Smolyak 2013, 521). This distinction reflected socialist regimes' commitment to eliminating commodity fetishism by organizing the rational production and redistribution of goods and services. Socialist production was supposed to allow for "comradely" relations between people and things by facilitating the self-conscious creation of objects which could serve as "companions" and "co-workers" in everyday life (Karpova 2020; Kiaer 2005). As inalienable labour involving the transformation of materials, DIY was arguably the ideal way of creating the socialist object: "modest and utilitarian, clearly manifesting the way it was produced, that is, the labour invested in it" (Karpova 2020, 3).

This juxtaposition of "open" socialist materialities with "closed" capitalist commodities was also a feature of Normalization-era Czechoslovak publications, including Dorka and Linia. As we shall see below, it provided a discursive framework for a wide range of officially endorsed messages about the pursuit of "active" leisure and socially useful labour, as well as the dangers of consumerism and petit-bourgeois values. These messages were strongly gendered: men were encouraged to take up renovation work and woodworking; women were encouraged to sew, knit, and learn vernacular textile crafts. This promotion of traditional activities reflected a wider return to conservative ideas of gendered citizenship during the Normalization period when official discourse began to promote the idea of there being (natural) differences between genders and their contributions to the household and family (Donert 2022). Yet, while men and women may have been addressed differently, the underlying messages about the social and ideological virtues of skilled activity remained the same. Indeed, while encouraging men and women to live a "quiet life" of private pursuits, Normalization-era Czechoslovak officials fretted that a state-sponsored programme of self-realization and increasing consumer opportunities (within and beyond the state system) would awaken latent petite-bourgeois tendencies in the population (Bren 2008). As we shall see below, making amateur "folk art" was presented as a possible panacea to such regressive tendencies, leading the individual away from acquisition and possessiveness of consumer culture towards a more authentic notion of creativity and taste.

Bringing folk arts home: a project in socialist needlecraft

> The home is a place of rest for the person, a place where he spends most of his free time working or relaxing. In order to fully satisfy our needs, it must give us a feeling of cosiness and warmth. It must be a place where we feel well, where our eyes rest, as well as our nerves. This is where embroidery and its suitable placement in the interior can make a big difference. (Dorka 1982/3)

The 1970s and early 1980s saw major investment into domestic infrastructure in Slovakia, including the construction of thousands of apartments in prefabricated panel buildings (*paneláky*). Launched in the aftermath of the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968, this

intensive building programme represented a belated "fulfilment of an interwar vision of modernity that emphasized the right to basic housing over the artistic qualities of individual housing" (Zarecor 2011, 3). The simple, functional interiors and modern amenities of these apartments provided material evidence of the progress of socialist industrialization, as well as the Communist Party's promise of social equality and class solidarity. They also introduced an until then largely rural Slovak population to the material conveniences and aesthetic conventions of a modern, urban lifestyle. Indeed, viewing the home as a prime site for the reproduction of the socialist citizen, the authorities set about providing citizens with guidelines on how to decorate and furnish their prefab homes. They encouraged Slovaks to embrace new styles of functional, modular furniture designed for small spaces, and to move towards an open, multifunctional floor plan which would allegedly promote (gender) equality and sociability in the home (Zemko and Zemková 1981). They also encouraged people to personalize the generic interiors of their *panelák* apartments with carefully chosen decorative elements, such as wallpaper, posters and paintings, soft furnishings, and family mementos. This advice to "*put something of yourself in your home*" (Linia 1972/4) resulted in an eclectic style which mixed conventional symbols of social status, such as cut glass and tea sets, with rustic elements inspired by Slovakia's peasant heritage.

Magazines such as Dorka and Linia were instrumental in communicating contemporary design and official ideas of "good taste" to the public. Addressing women as homemakers, Linia showcased the furniture and household products made by Czechoslovak state manufacturers and delivered advice on the layout, lighting, and décor of the modern home. The magazine also regularly featured the products of the country's craft cooperatives, extolling the creativity of their crafts(wo)men and the aesthetic value of handmade objects. Indeed, rustic pottery, rag carpets, handwoven textiles, and "folky" embroidered doilies graced the otherwise austere model interiors featured in the magazine, confirming their rightful place in the contemporary interior. "good taste" was thus expressed as much through the display and use of vernacular crafts, as it was through the adoption of functional furniture and modern light fixtures. This fashion for the vernacular was an even more prominent feature of the magazine *Dorka*, every issue of which carried instructions for numerous knitting, sewing, and decorative textile projects using popular techniques (embroidery, lace making, macramé, tatting, etc.). Throughout the 1970s, the number of projects featuring traditional styles of embroidery and bobbin lace visibly increased until they dominated the publication from the middle of the decade. Given that the majority of the projects featured in the magazine were submitted by its readers, the editorial choice to feature more projects with a vernacular design created the impression that they were part of a (still) living tradition. This impression was strengthened by the regular publication of articles showcasing traditional embroidery made by members of the Slovak Union of Women across the country.

This turn to the vernacular in Dorka and Linia reflected a move towards "organicist" styles of interior décor during late socialism (Fehérváry 2013). While post-War socialist modernism had promised prosperity and equality through greater industrialization, its lived reality was one of the cheap, man-made materials, shoddy production quality, and frequent shortages. As a result, designers and citizens alike began to embrace organic shapes, natural materials, and traditional vernacular crafts towards the end of the 1960s, attempting to soften the cold, grey uniformity of their material world (Fehérváry 2013).

However, the embrace of "folk" culture also formed part of a deliberate transformation of rural traditions into socialist folklore instigated by the post-War Czechoslovak state. Like other communist regimes, the Slovak authorities approached vernacular culture as a tool for political and social integration, and sought to bolster their legitimacy by creating a new, socialist popular culture out of pre-socialist rural traditions (Kaneff 2004). This process was facilitated by policies which simultaneously brought the production and transmission of "folk" culture under the authority of state institutions, and encouraged popular participation in the re-enactment of vernacular dance, music, and craft traditions (Feinberg 2018). Creating socialist "folk" culture thus involved both elements of cultural dispossession and "invention of tradition": vernacular traditions were stripped of their historical, religious, and social contexts and meanings, and turned into museum exhibits, folkloric performances, and elements of fashion and domestic decor. At the same time, citizens were encouraged to try their hand at making "folk arts" at home and to join dance and musical ensembles sponsored by employers, municipalities, and schools (Feinberg 2018).

Dorka was an important tool for the creation of amateur "folk" art out of historical Slovak textile cultures. After 1980, the work of the magazine's readers was supplemented by projects developed by professionals from the state-run Centre for Folk Art Production (*Ústredie ľudovej umeleckej výroby* - ÚĽUV). Tasked with adapting traditional styles and techniques to contemporary tastes, ÚĽUV designers picked out embroidered motifs from vernacular costume, re-sized them for better effect, and applied the new designs to projects for contemporary household textiles. Articles featuring such ÚĽUV projects juxtaposed pictures of these designs with photographs of original, historical textiles, making the connection between the contemporary design and its traditional source visually evident to the readers. By establishing this stylistic link, these articles therefore promoted the notion that embroidered doilies, pillowcases, and tablecloths were not only a natural offshoot of folk dress but also entirely compatible with a contemporary modernist interior. Thus, Dorka readers were told that "*It is proper to it enrich the modern interior with doilies or even embroideries hung on the wall, behind glass or as a wall hanging*" (Dorka 1982/3). Indeed, because these embroideries were part of folk heritage, they helped erase any whiff of bourgeois domesticity which might still cling to practices of domestic handiwork and their display:

> There is a great deal of simple beauty in folk embroidery. It is enough to choose a few little motifs and embroider them onto a doily or a tablemat – and we don't have to feel guilty about the time that we spent doing needlecraft. (Dorka 1982/3)

Scholars of socialist domesticity have shown that post-War socialist designers declared decorative textiles incompatible not only with the modern interior but also with a modern socialist way of life (Reid 2009, 482). The shift towards "organicist" styles in Normalization-era Czechoslovakia period, however, seems to have been accompanied by a corresponding shift in official attitudes towards domestic aesthetics. Rather than being symbolic of rural backwardness or nostalgia, magazines like Dorka and Linia presented doilies, tablecloths, and other domestic textiles as a valued genre of material culture which synthesized older, peasant traditions with modern, socialist "good taste." In fact, the proliferation of projects of needlework in Dorka and Linia gave readers the impression that textile crafts were an ideologically appropriate way for women to express their individual agency, creativity, and skill. And yet, contributors to Dorka and Linia often expressed a fear that lurking sentimentality could turn

such otherwise noble expressions of individual creativity into kitsch. As I show below, such anxieties about kitsch were driven partly by the Marxist-Leninist understanding of taste as a function of individual and societal political maturity. They were also driven by a worry that increasing standards of living could lead Slovak citizens into developing unhealthy consumer habits akin to their Western neighbours.

Kitsch and the perils of vernacular taste

While encouraging women to "put something of themselves" in their interiors, authors writing in Dorka and Linia regularly expressed doubts as to whether women could be trusted to furnish and decorate their homes without expert guidance. Both magazines carried numerous articles offering advice on how best to arrange the standard small dimensions of the standard *panelák* apartment, and solve common problems of privacy, space, and storage through DIY projects. Advocating a philosophy of "*less is more*" and "*simpler is more beautiful*" (Linia 21 January 1977), contributors adopted different approaches to showing readers how to create a modern, tasteful décor using the products of Czechoslovak state firms and craft cooperatives. One article, entitled "Visiting you at home" (*Navšteva u vás doma*), took readers on a photographic tour of the apartment of an anonymous compatriot (Linia 22 February 1977). The author praised the inhabitants for the harmonious simplicity and minimalism of their furniture arrangement and décor, and urged readers to "(*n)ote that the objects are respectfully arranged and do not – especially on the glazed shelf – give a cluttered impression*" (Linia 22 February 1977). Another article focused on teaching women how to discern the beautiful from the ugly, advising them to be careful when choosing decorative ceramics and textiles for their homes:

> We buy because that, which we take a liking to, flatters our taste. First we have to evaluate whether we can really trust our own taste. Is it mature enough to be able to distinguish the tasteful from the tasteless, the artistic object from the kitsch? (Linea 21 January 1977)

Common to these articles, then, was a portrayal of kitsch as a result of the excess of objects, ornament(s), and sentiment in the interior. Focusing on the pleasures and pitfalls of acquisition and display, the authors declared dried flowers, candles, plush cushions, and cheap souvenirs crimes against good ("socialist") taste. Yet, they also acknowledged that it could be difficult to recognize and resist the charms of kitsch objects. Alena Hanzlíková, the author of the Czech volume Taste and Bad Taste Around Us (*Vkus a Nevkus Kolem Nás*) warned her readers that '(t)rue beauty is neither marked with a signpost nor presented to us on a silver tray, just as a kitsch is not in a cage with a sign "beware, I bite" (1977, 49). The author of several popular books on sewing and textile crafts, Hanzlíková conceded that kitsch objects might even be more "perfect, more dazzling and more eloquent than a work of art" in the same medium and style (1977). The key to recognizing kitsch, she explained, lay in understanding its historical origins in the thirst for material accumulation and social emulation of the bourgeoisie. It was also a consequence of the historical divorce of artistic practice from local traditions of design and manufacture, and the resulting alienation of the labour of the artist, artisan, and the skilled worker. With capitalist industrialization driven by the pursuit of profit, she explained, both vernacular creativity and novel design were abandoned in favour of

"thoughtless emulation of old styles" which appealed to the status-seeking bourgeoisie (1977, 53).

Kitsch, in other words, was a material manifestation of commodity fetishism and alienation of (creative) labour under capitalist modernity. Although written for a general audience, Hanzlíková's account of the political economy of kitsch reflected orthodox socialist thinking on the subject (see Castillo 2010; Rubin 2006). Already before the Communist Party take-over in 1948, both Czechoslovak art critics and theorists identified kitsch as a problem of ideology, associating it with bourgeois decadence, fascism, and mass commercialization (Bell 2019; Pech 2009; Rusinko 2023). Widespread among conservative and left-wing thinkers alike, these ideas were given official sanction by the socialist authorities and communicated to the public via museum exhibitions, magazine columns, and popular publications (Bell 2019). These popularizations of academic analyses often portrayed kitsch not just as a particular expression of commodity fetishism, but also as a form of subversive materiality. As Alena Hanzlíková warned her readers, while real art was "humble" and "unassuming," "(k)itsch will come to you by itself, without being called, it will, in fact, bow to your interest and it will definitely not behave modestly, or politely" (1977, 44). Such statements articulated what Alexey Golubev has called the "elemental materialism" of socialist society – that is, the acknowledgement that materials, objects, and spaces could materialize emotions, objectify concepts, and shape human behaviour in ways which both confirmed and challenged the ideological status quo (2020, 5). The Normalization-era anxiety around kitsch was thus an acknowledgement that – even under the conditions of socialism – there was always a danger that objects might appeal to base human instincts, including greed and social competition.

Emphasizing rationality, restraint, and reuse, rather than abundance and novelty, contributors to Dorka and Linia sought to temper such consumer desires. Readers were advised to resist "bourgeois" acquisitiveness and refrain from emulating styles of décor found in foreign publications which belonged to "*a lifestyle alien to us*" – a veiled reference to Western consumer society (Dorka 1988/7). Instead, women were urged to draw on their vernacular heritage for aesthetic inspiration and ethical guidance on how to negotiate the "over-technified world" (*"pretechnizovaný" svet*) of socialist modernity (Linia 1975/1). Readers were reminded that beauty was the outcome of human creativity and "clever hands" (Dorka 1985/10), and products made by craft collectives were made with creative "feel," natural materials, and original designs – everything, one author noted, which was lacking in industrially manufactured products (Linia 1988/7). At times, this celebration of vernacular creativity was couched in language which overtly romanticized artisans as the 'bearers of the national traditions of our folk art (Hanzlíková 1977, 48) and read as a diffuse critique of the standardized industrial modernity of contemporary socialist Czechoslovakia. One article from Linia extolled the virtuous nature of the country's "folk artists," claiming that people who had never even travelled outside of their own village could create beautiful objects because they were "sensitive," had an unblemished character, were "honest people," and were in everyday contact with nature (1988/7). Good taste was not only to be expressed through the idiom of folk arts, but "folk art" itself appeared to have an implicit moral and ethical dimension which could be exploited if it was consumed correctly.

While purchasing and displaying "folk art" made by contemporary professionals offered consumers a safe way to imbue their domestic spaces with such values, the

broader question of how to incorporate the textile heritage of the past into urban, everyday life remained. As in the following *Dorka* article on the costume of the village of Čičmany in Northern Slovakia noted:

> One finds a lot of it in chests, put away very carefully. But those who hide them away do not like to open their doors to collectors of display cabinet trophies. For them the art of their ancestors something more. It is not sentimentality which attracts them to it. They simply need it . . . . . [n]ot because embroidery (in the style) of Čičmany would not be able find to find its place in the panel apartments of the city. But embroidered prieramky, rubaše and zapony [elements of folk dress] these really belong only in a museum, in the hands of a real expert or then only here, where they were made, when the inhabitants of Čičmany dress in them at different festive occasions. (Dorka 1981/9)

Here, the author's reference to "display cabinet trophies" was a warning about the connection between kitsch and petite bourgeois consciousness; glass-fronted cabinets and heavily carved buffets being prime symbols of the patrician household (Linia 1983/3). The fact that some collectors "misappropriated" original pieces for display, however, did not mean that folk crafts per se were deemed unfit for modern, urban living. The correct manner of appropriating the past was to leave the originals in the hands of the "real experts" (whether museum curators or villagers), and produce a modified version which was harmonious with the modernist interior of the contemporary home and lifestyle. The ideologically correct way of appropriating vernacular culture was therefore not to acquire it or seek to imitate it, but rather to *re-make* it anew within the aesthetic and functional parameters of the socialist material world. As we shall see below, explaining exactly what these parameters were was considered a job important enough to be the responsibility of the Slovak Union of Women. As we shall see below, the Union approached the production of such amateur "folk art" not merely as a hobby done by women in their spare time, but very much a collective endeavour falling under what the communist authorities deemed a "socially useful" activity.

Folk art as aesthetic education

In 1975, the Slovak Union of Women launched the national campaign *Krása Životu* (Beauty for Life). *Krása Životu* was aimed at mobilizing members of the organization's local chapters to create local amateur theatre, musical, and folk dance troupes, as well as needlework circles. As a mouthpiece of the Union, *Dorka* published a regular series on these activities. Written in a tone of surprise and delight, the authors of these articles extolled the "cleverness" and "industriousness" of their fellow compatriots, chronicling a series of visits to houses of culture, schools, and factories across the country. The women and the activities portrayed in the articles were clearly meant to stand as an example of socialist virtue. Thus, in the "*politically and culturally mature*" district of Čataj, the 108 local members enjoyed cooking courses and regular lectures, while benefitting from a course in vernacular embroidery led by two artisans employed by the ÚĽUV (Dorka 1976/4). Meanwhile, at the Clinic for Tuberculosis and Respiratory Diseases in the town of Dunajske Biskupice, a newly formed chapter of the Union led by a certain Doctor Lukáčová arranged an exhibit of needlecraft in honour of the 30th anniversary of the Soviet liberation of the country. "*Perhaps precisely because work in the health sector is so difficult and asks so much patience and sacrifice, professionals in this line of work welcome*

the relaxing, releasing, quiet of needlework," the author speculated, and noted that most of the exhibited items were consisted of embroideries "*designed and executed with the clean shapes of folk motifs*" (Dorka 1978/6).

According to Mária Urbanová, representative of the politico-educational section of the Slovak Union of Women, the aims *Krása Životu* were to help preserve the nation's cultural heritage, demonstrate its relevance to socialist life, and teach women how to rest "actively." The imperative to rest "actively" referred to the socialist understanding of leisure as a publicly shared activity, preferably involving education (usually referred to as *osveta* or enlightenment). As such, the Union presented itself as the main arbiter of "folk" culture in local communities, noting that young women often learned about "*the rich fountain of folk art*" at embroidery classes arranged by its membership (rather than from their mothers or grandmothers) (Dorka 1984/2). Paramount among the aims of the *Krása Životu* movement, however, was to give women the correct "aesthetic feel" (Dorka 1984/2). It was evident from the pages of *Dorka*, this "aesthetic feel" was less an inborn sensitivity, than an ability to be learned through careful instruction from the correct authority: trained artists and craftswomen, as well as colleagues from the Slovak Union of Women's who had been on specialized courses. Women were also able to find advice on composition, motifs, patterns, and colouring on the pages of Dorka itself. In one article, for example, the author advised women to hold back on the embroidery when decorating placemats:

> It is sufficient if we decorate it with a simple, easy, but effective and well-placed motif. Don't forget, that food served on a tasteful table linen tastes better. (Dorka 1976/3)

Beyond showcasing vernacular-style embroidery made by women, then, Dorka was meant to fulfil a didactic role, educating and shaping the taste of Slovak women. The importance placed on inculcating women with the "correct" aesthetic sensibilities was grounded in the Marxist-Leninist belief that the cultural and political enlightenment of the individual required guidance and education by the Communist Party (Yurchak 2006). As the Hungarian theorist Lászlo Szabó explained in the Slovak translation of his book Taste and Culturedness (*Vkus a kultúrnosť*, 1982), aesthetic values did not develop independently of political direction, but were the cumulative result of the historical process of class struggle. This meant that good taste had to be consciously transmitted to and appropriated by the individual as a matter of ideological instruction: in socialist society, he wrote, taste had "to be consciously programmed" (1982, 99). Publications like Dorka and Linia were ideal instruments of such programming in that they linked contemporary fashions and cultural heritage, and collective and individual leisure. Like other folkloric activities during this period, they provided the public with a particular kind of state-approved "aesthetic education": a "type of directed learning which provided a state-approved framework for individual expressions of creativity," tying individual action to collective, state-endorsed goals of commemoration and identity-creation (Kaneff 2004, 158). Indeed, campaigns like *Krása Životu* called upon women to view these activities as a civic duty, as well as a hobby, arguing that by partaking in these activities, women could educate themselves and others, and thus contribute to the overall advancement of socialist society.

Aesthetic education, then, was not only about cultivating "good taste." It also gestured towards a socialist humanist understanding of the authentic, essential self as cultivated

through creative and purposeful labour. Indeed, achieving the "aesthetic feel," depended not only upon developing an eye for beauty under careful guidance of experts but also in allowing space for creative self-expression in everyday life: "*In the free moments after work, sitting at embroidery is for many women an active relaxation, which also brings them the joy of creative work*" (Dorka 1975/5). This characterization of needlework as one of the small pleasures of everyday domesticity reflected a wider shift in official narratives about the ideal nature of socialist citizenship and society during Normalization. As Paulina Bren (2008) has argued, the post-1968 period saw a significant shift in official discourses about the official economic and social goals of socialist development from a focus on material prosperity to a celebration of the socialist system's ability to facilitate the "self-actualization" of citizens. Rather than promising to match the material conditions of its Western neighbours, state officials pledged to deliver a better quality of life for Czechoslovak citizens by ensuring their "social comforts," and guaranteeing them time for their "self-development" in everyday life. Under "real socialism," they argued, "realizing one's 'human essence' was to take priority over more concrete economic concerns" (Bren 2008, 846). Embroidery and other vernacular textile traditions were thus ideologically legitimate ways of pursuing such self-fulfilment: alongside DIY and outdoor activities, engaging in amateur crafts belonged to the "quiet life" of encouraged by the state.

The ideological valorization of amateur "folk art" production through campaigns such as *Krása Životu* was thus accompanied by the promotion of a particular idea of gendered citizenship. Reflecting on the Normalization-era authorities' approach to women – which combined an official commitment to their political and professional equality with an expectation that women did the majority of domestic and reproductive labour – it portrayed the exercise of traditional female skills as key to women's individual and collective self-realization. Yet, despite the evident conservatism of such messages, articles in Dorka and Linia did not advocate the resignation of women from wider goals of socialist society. Rather, by linking needlecraft with ideologically approved ideas of productive leisure and civic engagement, they presented needlecraft as an activity which could bring personal pleasure to the collective preservation of local and national cultural traditions. Indeed, the *Krása Životu* campaign not only lent equal ideological credence to embroidery courses and activities like cooking classes, and the professional activities of members of the Union of Women, but presented the re-creation and conservation of local, traditional folk textile techniques, the socialist emancipation of local women, and their "enlightenment" through lectures and courses as a singular, unproblematic – even logical – process. As a form of DIY which showcased national tradition and played with notions of socialist modernity, vernacular needlecrafts thus stretched socialist definitions of socially productive work and leisure beyond the conventions of (state) employment and collective action.

Conclusion

Today, the Normalization-era aesthetic conventions and material practices which were promoted to women in Dorka and Linia appear foreign, outmoded, and even a little tacky. Together with the material culture of socialism, they belong to a "dead modernism" – to use Vít Soukup's words – which now inhabits museum exhibitions and (other) spaces of post-communist nostalgia. In this article, I suggest that the ideological roots aesthetic can be understood by extending existing ideas about socialist-era cultures of consumption

and DIY to a new area of vernacular creativity: the amateur production of "folk art." Focusing in particular on the discursive presentation of projects and styles of vernacular embroidery (and their use in domestic décor) in the Slovak lifestyle magazines Dorka and Linia, I argue that the production of amateur "folk art" was valorized through its connection with a broader programme of "aesthetic education" which sought to direct and promote the "self-realization" of socialist citizens through creative and purposeful labour. Normalization-era discourses depicted the socialist citizen as a skilled creator and fostered a flourishing DIY culture, emphasizing such practices as an integral of a "quiet life" centred on family and hobbies. More than merely pragmatic responses to shortages, DIY activities were presented as both a hobby and a way individuals could participate in the building of socialist society (practically and metaphorically understood). As part of this wider culture of making, amateur "folk art" production was presented as a socially and ideologically acceptable pastime which helped synthesize historical rural traditions with the modern, socialist designs and lifestyle choices. As a distinct cultural practice, amateur folk art production thus formed part of a much larger ideological project which sought to link individual creativity to collective goals of socialist enlightenment.

Reading the official endorsement of vernacular embroidery through the literature on socialist-era DIY and material culture (rather than a more conventional textile history or gendered approach) allows me to make several wider observations about the ideological role of amateur "folk art" production during the Normalization era. The first observation is that such amateur production served not only to incorporate pre-socialist rural traditions into socialist public and popular culture but also formed an important medium through which to convey basic lessons in materialist thinking and socialist humanism to the population. Across the Eastern Bloc, socialist discourses on DIY reflected both a belief in modernization through education and technological progress and Marxist ideas about the centrality of unalienable labour for the emancipation and self-realization of socialist citizens. Relying on the same vision of the ideal socialist citizen as a "homo faber," the socialist authorities promoted amateur craftwork as a way for citizens to fashion themselves as enlightened and rational socialist subjects through autonomous, creative material praxis. The second observation is that this message contained within it a strand of scepticism about the ability of socialist industrial modernity to deliver such possibilities for healthy self-expression. Despite the repeated claims about the contemporaneity of vernacular crafts and their re-design for the modern interiors, articles in Dorka and Linia praised the handmade, the natural, and the small scale. Together with references to the "over-technified" nature of society and the dangers of kitsch aesthetics, this indicated a certain unease with the social and material promises of mass-produced modernity of late socialist (Czecho-)Slovakia which ought to be investigated further.

Note

1. I examined the entire socialist era run of both *Dorka* (1965–1989) and *Linia* (1968–1989), and chose 50 articles from *Dorka* (chiefly from the period 1975–1985) for deeper analysis, as well as 65 articles from *Linia* from the same period. Both magazines were published in the Slovak language and aimed at the Slovak population, depicting mainly (but not exclusively) Slovak "folk culture" and the products of state industries and cooperatives located in the Slovak Socialist Republic. While they also showcased domestic industries, the equivalent Czech

magazines *Praktická žena* (The Practical Woman) and *Domov* (The Home) did not share Dorka and Linia's focus on "folk art" and vernacular styles (Kořínková 2015).

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