Fashion in the golden age of Yugoslavian 20th century textile and clothing industry

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Abstract. The development of fashion seems to have occurred in societies which were changing, where that change is valued by some group within the society, and social mobility was possible. Fashion is not possible in totally egalitarian society nor in a rigid hierarchy. The paper presents Slovenian/Yugoslavian fashion design based on local industrial and educational capacities in the golden age of the textile and clothing branch. The paradox of Western style fashion in the frame of socialistic political system in commented. In the late 1940s, Yugoslav modernity transmitted through fashionable dress was mainly representational, since industry was unable to deliver fashionable dresses due to post-war poverty and backwardness. Yugoslavia’s different path toward socialism was mirrored in its different symbolic and material production of dress in comparison to that of other Eastern European countries. Although factories had been nationalised, attacks on Western fashion were never intense, and the Yugoslav regime did not establish a central dress institution to politically direct the design, production and distribution of clothes as it was the case in most Eastern European countries. The restoration and the development of the textile industry evoked a need for new jobs, specifically in textile and fashion design. The fashion scene in Slovenia/Yugoslavia started to differ from other Eastern countries. In the golden age of the national textile and clothing industry fashion collections have gone hand in hand with the European fashion.

1. Introduction

Fashion is a system of institutions, organizations, individuals, groups, producers, users, events and practices, media, etc. Fashion is the result of acceptance of certain cultural values, which are open to relatively rapid influences or change [1].

Fashion is mobile; it is a process in motion, forever changing, reflecting society and time. Fashion illustrates the multi-layered and heterogeneous nature of time, cultural-behavioral patterns and communication channels, as well as certain aspects of the identity of groups and individuals. Fashion is influenced by society, culture, industry, the economy, technology, the living environment, the media, religion and numerous other factors. These reveal the importance of clothes as an aspect of fashion and outward appearance as a means of expressing status, privilege, trends, inspirations, symbolic messages, progressiveness, backwardness, needs within a particular historical period, the social and economic situation, as well as other phenomena and motivations that rapidly change the culture of dress and fashion [2]. Fashion is to do with innovation, the illusion of novelty. It is characterized by change, change in the past but also an expectation of change in the future. Fashion is part of our social world. For a particular style of clothing to become a fashion it actually has to be worn by some people and recognized and acknowledged to be a fashion. By fashionable we also mean the most admired styles, the styles with special significance of representing the current ideal [3].
The development of fashion seems to have occurred in societies which were changing, where that change is valued by some group within the society, and social mobility is possible. Fashion is not possible in totally egalitarian society nor in a rigid hierarchy. Therefore, in socialist, non-Western societies there seems to have been a tendency for dress styles and forms of adornment to remain fairly stable, to change very slowly. Rigid social hierarchies seem to have effectively inhibited changing patterns of dress. In the event of challenges to the political status quo, the elite use sumptuary laws to control the dress of those seeking to rise above their allotted station, and to emphasize their political dominance [3].

2. Yugoslavian textile and clothing industry

Although the Yugoslav textile and clothing industry has never been classified as priority after the WW2, it ranked high in terms of the production volume and the number of employees. The modernization process was very slow due to the lack of funds; its accumulation was transferred to other industrial branches which were considered more important. In the first ten years after the WW2 the economic development was exclusively dictated by the state politics. It was managed centrally and the needs of the individual republics were completely subordinate to the federal plan [4]. There was textile and clothing industry in each of the six republics of Yugoslavia. By 1985, it engaged around a million employees. The development of domestic textile and clothing ready-made production designated an important economic objective, although many problems obstructed its implementation [5].

The most part of the textile and clothing industry destroyed during the war has been restored by 1947; it was important to maximize the production to meet the basic necessities of life including textiles and clothing. This was achieved by working in multiple shifts and by voluntary and unpaid work. Despite poor operating conditions, textile and clothing industry achieved above-average results and became one of the main exporters. Most of the problems it faced came from the administrative-centralized management of the entire economy, caused by frequent changes in management, bureaucratic requirements to prepare various reports and statistic data, change of regulations, etc. Companies were also challenged by the shortage and poor quality of raw and auxiliary materials, irregular supplies, the shortage of hardware and spare parts, poor quality of coal, electricity and water deficiency, the lack of qualified personnel, fluctuation of human resources, etc. [4]. Post-war textile and clothing ready-made products in socialist Yugoslavia lacked the quality of textile materials as well as innovative overall design. Additional problems were caused by the lack of trained personnel. So, it was not surprising that most citizens had their clothes custom-sewed by local fashion tailors. In 1959 only a quarter of Yugoslav citizens bought ready-made clothes [5].

In the period 1971-1975, textile and clothing industry recorded an increase in production of hosiery, socks, underwear and other apparel by an average of 11%, while the production volume has not increased in spinning and weaving industry. Export has increased which was mainly due to the increased quality of products. The major part of the accumulation was invested in the renovation and modernization of the machinery. The number of employees increased in clothing industry, while the total number of employees has remained the same due to the reduction of the night work for women. Despite the difficulties, textile and clothing production was additionally modernized and automated in the period between 1976 and 1980 [4]. In the 1970's, the state-owned textile industry was a significant economic sector, covering approximately 12% of total industrial production [5].

Despite the crisis and the stabilization measures, the textile and clothing industry managed to achieve above-average economic performance from 1981 to 1985. The production was stable, with an increase in exports and improved coverage of imports by exports [4]. In the 1980's, Yugoslavia was among the leading clothing producers. Yugoslav fashion brands were sold both locally and internationally [5].

In the last period before the disintegration of the Yugoslavia, the collapse of the textile industry began. This was due to deteriorating economic conditions, hyperinflation, the decline in the purchasing power of the population, problems with imports of raw and reproduction materials, etc.
Productivity was decreasing, salaries were still lagging behind. The branch tried to achieve the free formation of prices, harmonization of import and export prices and customs duties, change in export legislation and increase in salaries [4]. The situation dramatically changed during the 1990's and early 2000's, when many textile companies ceased to operate and many employees in the textile sector lost their jobs as a result of the collapse of the internal Yugoslav market, and as a consequence of the privatization process [5].

**Figure 1.** Entrance to MTT textile factory in Maribor, Slovenia
(https://static.vecer.com/media/ocm/categories/tekstilna_industrija_v_mariboru/Tekstilna-Industrija.jpg)

**Figure 2.** Spinning production
(https://static.vecer.com/images/slike/2017/03/07/00126501F-1980.jpg)

### 3. Yugoslavian fashion
In the late 1940’s, Yugoslav modernity transmitted through fashionable dress was mainly representational, since industry was unable to deliver fashionable dresses due to post-war poverty and backwardness. Yugoslavia’s different path toward socialism was mirrored in its different symbolic and
material production of dress in comparison to that of other Eastern European countries. Although factories had been nationalized, attacks on Western fashion were never intense, and the Yugoslav regime did not establish a central dress institution to politically direct the design, production and distribution of clothes as it was the case in most Eastern European countries. Urbanized and elegant Western dresses played an ideological role in the domestic fashion press, where they were presented in opposition to the deprivations of the Soviet type of socialism [6].

Until the late 1950’s Yugoslavian fashion was ruled by the trend of copying other designs and uniforms that were already-made in the clothing production. The development of the textile industry evoked a need for new jobs, specifically in hiring textile and fashion designers. During that period, Yugoslavia was similar to the other socialist countries such as Russia or Czechoslovakian Republic with regards to fashion [7].

In 1952 the state started investing in fashion system. The fashion system soon after became major feature of modern-urban life in an improved socialist environment. Western fashion and fashion trends were subject of review and evaluation by a socialist system in manner to fit the totalitarian pretensions of the regime. Standardization of fashion and control changes were made by specific aesthetics code - "socialist good taste". However, the ideal socialist apparel was an ideological construct that had little to do with real life. In order to prevent conflicts and possible disappointments in the power of the state, the regime embarked on a project to create a whole range of institutions that improved the fashion production and started the commercial revolution [8].

The situation in fashion was changing together with the political and social movements. The real beginnings of the revolutionary and extravagant fashion started in late 50’s and early 60’s. At that time the design was more oriented to the future, contemporary art and politics. Yugoslav fashion production of the 1960's followed current Western fashion codes, but at the same time it built its own distinctive style by incorporating exotic motifs taken from the thesaurus of the regional culture [7]. Since 1957, the textile and clothing industry began to employ designers in greater numbers. Companies started hiring artists from the Institute of Applied Arts (Belgrade) and other professional associations of applied artists. After more than decade of isolation the fashion designers returned as wanted and needed professionals. For the sake of improving market supply, the government proposed the establishment of consumer councils. According to the new market orientation the customers had to be in focus in all spheres of economic and social life [7].

Privately owned fashion salons were officially recognized in Yugoslavia but were legally restricted, as private companies were allowed to employ only up to five people. Even the most prestigious among them, such as that of the Croatian designer Zuži Jelinek, could not develop into proper fashion houses. Jelinek was well informed about the latest fashion trends, but her innate minimalism fitted well with the ideal of socialist simplicity, while adding a much-craved dose of glamour. In 1959, Jelinek attempted to establish her fashion house in New York. Although she enjoyed enthusiastic and professional support in America, her project failed, as she could not produce her clothes in sufficient quantities for American market. ZuZi Jelinek learned her trade in pre-war Paris working at the Nina Ricci fashion house. In 1960, Globus magazine considered her as Croatian Coco Chanel [6].

Another difference of Yugoslav fashion system compared to other socialist countries was based on the liberal media approach to fashion. This approach was manifested through the concept of the popular women's magazines of the time. The achievements of the Western fashion intrigued the local public; its desire to imitate became larger [9]. Founded in 1953, the new Yugoslav fashion magazine Svijet (World) strongly endorsed Western fashion trends. Svijet did not acknowledge the post-war reality that burdened its readers with scarcities and poverty. Instead, the abundant use of unreferenced Western fashion quotations expanded into a whole new parallel dream world to show how Yugoslav socialism was different from other types of socialism, and even luxurious [6].

In the 80’s well developed textile and clothing industry presented up-to date collections from top quality materials. In the golden age of the branch fashion collections went hand in hand with the
European fashion. They were presented twice a year on renowned fashion exhibitions in Belgrade, Ljubljana and Sarajevo.

![Fashion show, Ljubljana 1962](https://dnevnik.si/1042759063)

**Figure 3.** Fashion show, Ljubljana 1962 (https://dnevnik.si/1042759063)

![Fashion collection at the exhibition Zuzi Jelinek – ambasador of fashion, Zagreb City Museum 2008](http://hrcak.srce.hr/134556)

**Figure 4.** Fashion collection at the exhibition Zuzi Jelinek – ambasador of fashion, Zagreb City Museum 2008 (http://hreak.srce.hr/134556)

4. **Conclusion: Yugoslavian fashion as an inspiration**

Never in the past did fashion look to the past as often as today. Sometimes it even seems that at some point, the fashion turned and went in the opposite direction. Fashion designers keep returning to history because of the rich traditional textile techniques. By using modern technology, they change them to contemporary ones [11].

Yugoslav fashion of the second half of the 20th century has proved to be up-to-date and comparable to Western fashion [12]. In the 21st century it has been and hopefully will continue to be an inspiration for global contemporary collections. For example: in 2012, fashion designer Sanja Grcic revived the
kult work shoes *Borosana* produced in Bosnian Borovo shoe factory in the 60’s. She gave a new look to rather boring orthopaedic footwear. Other fashion collections of numerous Yugoslavian textile and clothing brands could also be revived to honour the creativity and innovation of fashion design from the golden times of Yugoslavian textile and clothing industry.

![Figure 5](http://www.delo.si/assets/media/picture/20120607/Kult__borosanke%20sanja%204.jpg?rev=1)

**Figure 5.** New life of *Borosana* protective shoes

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