

Woe to you if you call him a “stylist”: Alexandre Arngoldt considers himself a “designer”. His ironic and bold creations are becoming famous all around the world. Nothing could be further from the styles of

Surprise: it's a Russia “hot” in selling style

FASHION 1

by Cristina Giuliano

the past for the creator of “post-Soviet luxury prêt-à-porter”. Breaking into the American market is now his major objective. With the Italian fabrics that he regularly uses.

Eighteenth floor in the new Saint Petersburg's suburb. It's like saying you live in an ivory tower. A security door, double bolt locks. And then even more stairs. Door. Locks. Stairs. Door. Spiral staircase. And finally you arrive at the top. Windows all around you. Round and white, making a guest feel like a little bird in a cage. A happy bird though, who dominates the Czars' capital from up on high.

Guiding us up is Maria, the muse who takes care of everything. Geisha-like bangs. Attentive hands. Nimble in handling a heavy bunch of keys. Quick in opening the door of the glass cage. There is a large balcony outside. “The Smolnij palace is over there”, says the girl as she gestures towards a point in the distance – indicating the marvelous play of the domes. A bit small, but it can indeed be seen. All on a small scale, but you can see the entire city. A carpet of houses and streets, cathedrals and factories, grandeur and poshlost (bad taste). “Inspiring!”, affirms the maestro, with perfect timing. And this line marks the entrance to the scene of the new genius of Russian fashion. Someone who knows him well advises against calling Alexandre Arngoldt a “stylist. Better to use designer – otherwise he will get angry”. But seeing him so content in his ivory tower,

smiling, his eyes laughing, it's hard to imagine him irritated. Like trying to imagine a cloud in that lapis lazuli sky up above his head. So blue it seems fake. So blue it could be a metaphor. “We live a bit here and a bit in the capital”, he murmurs in Russian, snuggling into the white sofa as he adjusts his colorful T-shirt with horizontal pinstripes. “At the beginning we weren't quite sure about this house; we were afraid it might be a little too much on the outskirts”, adds the geisha. And you might even agree with her, after a half hour in the metro in the middle of chas pik (rush hour). “But it's much better here”, says the couturier. “Away from the traffic, away from the confusion, the ideal place to create”.

It's hot in the room. And the green tea, just brought in by Maria with some nibbles, is hot too. Just enough time to swallow a bite and you realize that the maestro is not aiming for Old Europe. His creations, ironic and bold, are “ready for the American market”. And he has been “working now for a long time”, to break through across the ocean.

The center of gravity for artistic production is still in the capital of the Czars. “I go to Moscow to do business, but I still prefer to create here in Saint Petersburg where I have my studio”. But he admits that “both cities are enjoyable in



their own way and complement each other". The words are from the designer of "post-Soviet luxury prêt-à-porter", the only one able to march his models down the catwalk wearing pistols and Mickey Mouse ears; able to use "Italian fabrics" sometimes with eccentric taste, but never excessive. He can revisit a classic style, experiment with lace, appliqué and colors; and still amaze with a line of jewels at the last "Moscow Fashion Week", the major Russian event in the industry.

But for Arngoldt the geography of success has extended its boundaries. He links shows in New York, Tokyo and Beijing. And this ardent supporter of the "Made in Russia" keeps receiving more and more applause. Today he tells me he is "horrified" by the "invasion" of cheap Chinese products in the markets near his home. "The politicians should do something", he says, outrage showing in his eyes while his mouth is still smiling. "I am an admirer of oriental culture, but everything that came before is almost ruined now. Thrown away. The same Chinese art which used to be an expression of the spirit is now produced in factories. And it's all to the detriment of quality".

In short, a "real crime" quite different from bringing guns to the catwalk. Especially for someone who looks at history from the top of the high fashion tower. At one time he was so smitten that he dedicated an entire collection to a hero in Chinese poetry.

But now, the broken heart of the prince of "hand-made in Saint Petersburg" is being consoled. Sponsored by the multinational Company Pharma-Deborah, for autumn-winter 2005-2006 he is designing different legends with other heroes, a him and a her with "industrial elegance" who "don't know each other but are already linked by their nostalgia for the past". In the language of fashion this is all interpreted as "a new joy for well-defined cuts, embellished with materials from the big city". Such as "pearled steel, complemented by shiny cotton, the luminosity of metal and the elasticity of fabric, minimalist style but never boring".

Jumbled details for the non-initiated. But a universal explanation can be found by simply looking at the clothing or bracelets by the Russian designer. Forget the fur hats and balalaikas. What you see being modeled on the catwalk are absolutely contemporary pieces. Soviet styles are not even a memory, but you



_Shows in New York, Tokyo and Beijing. Severe tailoring, enriched by materials from the big city. Arngoldt's production is not aimed at the European market

can detect Arngoldt's experience in Milan with Prada (1992-93) and Ferretti (1992).

At times you can even sense the swishing sound of Milan fashion. Even though our designer doesn't want to admit it. "I don't take any Italian designer as a model", he says as he sits down on the edge of the white sofa, after reviewing the most recent tailor-made items hanging on a stand. "And the European market doesn't interest me right now", he says as he bites into a snack, displaying an aristocratic temperament worthy of a story by Mickhail Zoshchenko.

The room has by now cooled down a bit and the green tea is almost finished. And the surrounding sky has been transformed by the approaching sunset. The maestro, though, is still his cordial self. He says goodbye, his smile unchanged, and Maria once again has the task of showing me down the stairs. Once out the door you find yourself back in the reality of the usual *rinok* (Russian bazaar) that surrounds the building and continues down toward the metro station. There are fruit and vegetables on the stands, and stationery and the same unoriginal junk. Fake labels. Imitation silk. The quality is often poor and the price is negotiable. To understand, you just have to look up. Or look around a bit: even in Russia high fashion lives in an ivory tower.