

An American Style: Global Sources for New York Textile and Fashion Design 1915–1928

On View September 27, 2013–
February 2, 2014

Ilonka Karasz
in "Peruvian
poncho," ca. 1916.
Image 2A18815,
American
Museum of
Natural History
Library.



20
YEARS

Bard
Graduate
Center: Decorative
Arts, Design
History, Material
Culture

On View

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This remarkable exhibition features rare textiles and garments ranging from a 1920's hand-batiked caftan-style dress and mass-market hand-blocked silks to Native American and other indigenous dress. Never-before-seen photographs, objects, and design manuals will be on view.

An American Style: Global Sources for New York Textile and Fashion Design, 1915–1928 examines the efforts of the American Museum of Natural History to educate and inspire New York textile and fashion designers during and after World War I. The exhibition will be on view from September 27, 2013, to February 2, 2014, in the Focus Gallery at the Bard Graduate Center: Decorative Arts, Design History, Material Culture.

Background

Beginning in 1915, New York's American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) embarked upon a mission to inspire and energize the American design industry by giving textile designers and manufacturers unprecedented access to the museum's ethnographic collections. The movement, which at first was limited in focus, was sparked by the disruption in creative direction from Europe caused by World War I. Drawing upon the imperialistic notion that Euro-American culture could lay special claim to indigenous artifacts from the Americas, AMNH anthropology curators sought to innovate a distinctly "American" design idiom based on the museum's vast collections of Native American, Mesoamerican, Andean, and South American objects. Paralleling the globalization of national consciousness as the United States entered the war in 1917, the AMNH began to embrace a wider array of non-Western material from a more global selection of cultures, such as Koryak (Siberian) fur coats and West African robes.

The central figures in this project were curator of anthropology Clark Wissler (1870–1947), assistant curator of anthropology Herbert J. Spinden



(1879–1967), curator of Peruvian art Charles W. Mead (1845–1928), and M. D. C. (Morris De Camp) Crawford (1882–1949), research fellow

at the AMNH and *Women's Wear* journalist. Naturally, Crawford was a key liaison to manufacturers and designers, but many documents in the museum's archives suggest that Spinden, Wissler, and Mead were equally instrumental, if not more so, in the museum's effort to promote a so-called "primitive" design language. These men, dubbed the "fashion staff," by journalist Elizabeth Miner King in 1917, presented lectures, held classes, published instructive design manuals, and curated temporary exhibitions. They also selected ethnographic objects for inclusion in the study rooms; allowed textile designers unfettered access to specimen storage rooms; and loaned museum artifacts to design houses and department stores. Seeking a toehold in the broader world of clothing design, the AMNH curators took deliberate steps to attract fashion designers and reluctant manufacturers to the museum, which included supplementing the study room collections with a larger variety of specimens that ranged from Nivkhi fish-skin jackets to garments from the Philippines and Javanese textiles. Designers and manufacturers quickly responded.

Walter Mitschke for H. R. Mallinson & Co. Drawing for "Zuni Tribe," ca. 1927. Pencil and gouache on paper. Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Gift of Robert and Joan Brancale, 2008.1950.35.

Decorated fish skin coat,
Nivkhi, Siberia, acquired 1898.
Salmon skin, cut out, appliquéd;
pigment, reindeer sinew, hair.
Division of Anthropology,
American Museum of Natural
History, 70/83.



The Exhibition

*An American Style:
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York Textile and Fashion
Design, 1915–1928*

situates the AMNH's efforts to engender a distinctly American design aesthetic in the context of the United States's search for cultural moorings that began with the American Arts and Crafts movement and proliferated through World War I. By examining the disciplinary intersection of early twentieth-century anthropology and American industrial design, as well as the influence of modernist (or American) primitivism, the exhibition presents four major themes: The AMNH's promotion of "American" sources for design inspiration; global sources and fashion designs; the 1919 *Exhibition of Industrial Art*; and the legacy of this effort into the 1920s.

A display of the design manuals written by Mead and Wissler alongside related drawings and textiles will reveal the conceptual underpinnings and educational outreach of the AMNH's effort. The exhibition will feature loans of Mexican clay stamps and Native American dress, as well as a Koryak fur coat and an Nivkhi fish-skin coat from the AMNH. Examples of the movement's few surviving textiles and garments loaned from the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Museum of American History-Smithsonian Institution, the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum will also be on view, including a hand-batiked caftan-shaped dress from the 1920s and hand-blocked silks for the mass market. To evoke the legacy of the movement into the 1920s, silk prints from Stehli Silk Co. Americana series (1925) and the H. R. Mallinson & Co. American Indian series (1928) will also be on display.

In lieu of extant modern designs, the exhibition focuses on an extraordinary cache of negatives from the AMNH

In 1919, after four years of promoting a National design identity based on the ethnographic collections, the AMNH mounted the *Exhibition of Industrial Art in Textiles and Costumes*. On view for two weeks in November, the show featured a comprehensive display of indigenous artifacts and contemporary designs that was clearly intended to promote the utility and value of the museum to designers and industry. By combining handcrafted and industrial products in a museum display, the AMNH unabashedly sought popular validation while trumpeting the commercial viability of its "American" project.

During the next decade, Stehli Silk Co. and H. R. Mallinson & Co. produced silk prints designs such as "Inca" and "Shoshoni Tribe," respectively, based on artifacts in the AMNH ethnographic collections. These silk prints trumpeted the movement's legacy into the late 1920s and championed a style that was at the time described as "intimately and unquestionably our own."



Model in "Eskimo" hide, fur,
and sinew coat, ca. 1916. Image
2A18808, American Museum of
Natural History Library.



Shoshoni bag, Fremont County, Fort Washakie, Wyoming, acquired 1901. Elk hide, glass beads, cloth, thread. Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, 50/2347.

Special Collections Archive and related ephemera dating from 1915 to 1928. Archival images feature such designers as Harriet Meserole, Ruth Reeves, and Mariska Karasz modeling ethnographic garments from the museum's collection about 1916 and also document garments created for the 1919 *Exhibition of Industrial Art*. To communicate the breadth and varied scope of the exhibition, a digital media display will feature surviving installation photographs found in the Special Collections Archive. Notable designers such as Ilonka Karasz and Jessie Franklin Turner, as well as the lesser-known Hazel Burnham Slaughter and Max Meyer, will be represented throughout the exhibition.

An American Style: Global Sources for New York Textile and Fashion Design, 1915–1928 is especially significant this year, as New York celebrates the centennial of the 1913 Armory Show. The seminal exhibition that trumpeted the formal, non-representational mode of rendering form that marked the emergence of modern art in America. And indeed, many of the designers who participated in the AMNH's activities worked in Greenwich Village, the thriving artistic and cultural epicenter of the avant-garde. The embrace by these designers of a more graphic and less representational aesthetic would be a harbinger of American design in the decades that followed.

The exhibition is also relevant to contemporary audiences, since in recent years, prominent fashion designers have capitalized on their exposure to museum collections and a diverse array of sources from around the globe. Indigenous American materials have inspired the ready-to-wear collections of Proenza Schouler and Rodarte, as well as capsule collections for such brands as Pendleton Woolen Mills and Adidas. One can view these new designs as an indication of the lasting significance of the AMNH's project to impact and influence designers during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Publication

A fully illustrated catalogue with an extended essay by curator Ann Marguerite Tartisinis accompanies the exhibition. Through advertising, documentary photographs, and illustrations by important designers, the book positions the AMNH project in the broader narrative of early twentieth-century design culture in New York, which includes the roles played by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Newark Museum. Utilizing an extraordinary trove of previously unpublished negatives in the AMNH Special Collections Archive, two photographic essays punctuate the catalogue. The first features documentary images of models in ethnographic garments taken at the museum about 1916; the second documents the fashion designs created for the *Exhibition of Industrial Art, 1919*. As these images confirm, at the core of the AMNH project was its engagement with designers and manufacturers. The

"Aztec water motif," shown at Herbert Spinden's lecture, "Textile Arts of Mexico and Central America," 1916. Image 219784, American Museum of Natural History Library.



book includes examples of work by designers who went on to become celebrated professionals in their respective fields, such as Karasz, Reeves, and Turner, it also highlights under-recognized designers deserving of further investigation, such as textile designer Martha Ryther, designer and illustrator Harriet Meserole, and fashion designer Edward L. Mayer. To give proper attribution and recognition to designers who left an indelible imprint on the project, the catalogue concludes with a selection of short biographies. Additional profiles of key manufacturers, department stores, and curators are also included. Distributed by Yale University Press, the book will be available at the BGC Gallery and through the website (bgc.bard.edu).

Focus Gallery

The Focus Gallery presents small-scale exhibitions that are part of an academically innovative project that also includes graduate seminars, public programming, and publications both in print and on line. Envisaged as a laboratory, the Focus Gallery projects promote experimentation in display, interpretation, and the use of digital media and reflects the BGC's commitment to exhibitions as integral to scholarly activity.

Gallery Programs

Lectures, study days, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212.501.3011 or e-mail programs@bgc.bard.edu.



Ruth Reeves in Native American dress, ca. 1916. Image 2A18824, American Museum of Natural History Library.

Exhibition Tours

Guided tours for adult and school groups are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 am and 4 pm and on Thursdays from 11 am to 7 pm. Reservations are required for all group visits. To schedule a tour, please call 212.501.3013 or e-mail tours@bgc.bard.edu.

The Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 am to 5 pm and Thursday from 11 am to 8 pm. The admission fee is \$7 general, \$5 senior and students (valid ID); admission is free Thursday evenings after 5 p.m. *For information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit bgc.bard.edu.*

For press information and images, please e-mail press@bgc.bard.edu or call 212-501-3074.

