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## Morris De Camp Crawford and the “Designed in America” Campaign, 1916-1922

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The start of the First World War stimulated among other things a reassessment of America’s relationship with Europe. Many in the art world voiced the need for the industrial arts to assert independence and William Laurel Harris echoed popular sentiment when he wrote in *Good Furniture* magazine:

We are.....a great industrial nation without an industrial art. Now is the time, and now is the hour, when by intelligent action our manufacturers can rectify this lack of practical thought in our educational efforts. The manufacturers, the educators and the artistic portion of the nation must join hands in creating an industrial art that will bring prosperity, happiness and the charm to all the American people.”<sup>1</sup>

Harris’s call to arms for the industrial arts was taken up with particular fervor by Morris De Camp Crawford, a textile scholar and editor at *Women’s Wear*, a daily journal for the fashion industries. (Fig. 1) Unlike many of his colleagues in the textile and fashion trades who feared the impending separation from Europe, Crawford optimistically viewed the war as the perfect opportunity for American textiles and fashions to claim its independence. In 1916, Crawford assembled a group of educators and industrialists from New York to discuss the plight of American design and its improvement through proper education in the industrial arts. Together with Henry W. Kent of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Albert Blum of the United Piece Dye Works, Dr. Clark Wissler of the American Museum of Natural History, and E. W. Fairchild, publisher of *Women’s Wear*, Crawford crafted a plan to provide training for artists and manufacturers through an ambitious series of lectures, exhibitions, and more importantly, a textile design contest. The resulting “Designed in America” campaign involved hundreds of artists and silk manufacturers between the years 1916 and 1922 and produced some intriguing textiles based on museum artifacts.<sup>2</sup>

As the chief architect of the “Designed in America” campaign, Crawford was its most ardent advocate and well-known spokesman. Tapping personal connections he had forged with the textile industry, museums, and *Women’s Wear* he relentlessly pursued the union of artists and museums, a personal mission which lasted his whole career. His work with textile designers crowned an already long career associated with the textile industry, specifically as a salesman and technician with H. B. Claflin & Co. and as an agent for the cotton converter Lawrence Taylor and Co. In 1915, he was hired by E.W. Fairchild as design editor of *Women’s Wear* -- the same year he received an honorary research position at the American Museum of Natural History. A self-trained scholar of Andean textiles, Crawford’s life-long interest in the subject had led to further independent study at the Natural History Museum and eventually two publications *Peruvian Textiles* (1915) and *Peruvian Fabrics* (1916).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Crawford’s love for Andean textiles would be his signature stamp on the “Designed in America” campaign,

and one that would have a lasting influence on some of its participants.

Crawford's first step in the "Designed in America" campaign was to get artists and manufacturers into the museums. In an article "Styling a Silk Line" (unsigned but most likely penned by Crawford) which appeared in the *American Silk Journal* in May 1918, Crawford encouraged artists to investigate the design possibilities of museum collections.

While the use of museum collections for design sources was not a new idea (many of the great American museums and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London were founded with industrial applications in mind), Crawford's singular, nationalistic vision and emphasis on the primacy of ethnographic art distinguished his endeavors.

With the assistance of a sympathetic Dr. Clark Wissler, Curator of the Anthropology Department at the American Museum of Natural History, Crawford launched programs to lure designers into the museum that included special exhibitions, tours for artists, classes in technical instruction, and, lastly, a series of lectures in which several museum curators participated. Throughout the years 1916 to 1921, the American Museum of Natural History responded to its new role with enthusiasm and support. Representatives from several of the largest textile firms in New York became frequent users of the collections at the Natural History Museum including H.R. Mallinson & Co., Levinson & Bessels, John Wanamaker, Johnson, Cowdin & Co., and Central Textile Co. Even the more traditional silk firm, Cheney Brothers, was among the visitors to the Natural History Museum and produced a line of silks (**Fig. 2**) based on Peruvian and Koryak sources.<sup>4</sup>

Crawford encountered equal if not more enthusiasm for his cause at the Brooklyn Museum, especially from Stewart Culin, Curator of Ethnology. Culin eagerly responded to Crawford's campaign by allowing special loans to designers and manufacturers, organizing special exhibitions, and lectures and classes on "primitive"[sic] art. Both Crawford and Culin encouraged research primarily among the ethnographic collections. Culin even went so far as to establish a special study room for designers within the museum where they might examine objects in private. (**Fig. 3**) Some of New York's leading textile and fashion designers became frequent users of The Brooklyn Museum's study room including Edward L. Mayer, Jessie Franklin Turner, J. Wise, Ruth Reeves, Herman Patrick Tappé, and Harry Collins. In a memo to the Director and Trustees in 1919, Culin noted "Hardly a day passes without one or more designers from leading industrial establishments in New York and other large American cities visiting the Museum in search of inspiration....."<sup>5</sup>

The activity of textile manufacturers, artists, and fashion designers with ethnology collections culminated in the Exhibition of Industrial Arts organized by M.D.C. Crawford at the American Museum of Natural History from November 12 - December 1, 1919. Here the halls of the Natural History Museum were transformed into a temporary exhibition space to show off to the public the products made from research among collections at both museums. In many cases, the new designs (both textiles and costumes) were displayed along with the museum objects that inspired them. Silk producers Mallinson & Co. and Cheney Brothers were joined by displays of embroideries

by the firm of David Aaron (**Fig. 4**), as well as installations by fashion designers Jessie Franklin Turner, Harry Collins, and Max Meyer.<sup>6</sup>

All the while designers were plumbing museum collections for inspiration, Crawford was conducting a massive media campaign in support of their work. And it was as a propagandist for the “Designed in America” campaign that Crawford truly excelled. He extensively documented the work of textile designers within museum collections not only in *Women’s Wear*, but through related trade journals, magazines and his own books. A prolific writer, Crawford wrote more than two hundred articles and one hundred “design features” for *Women’s Wear*, he published nine articles in other journals and magazines, and wrote two books, all between the years 1915 and 1922.

A hallmark of Crawford’s articles and design features in *Women’s Wear* was the importance he placed on the indigenous arts of the Americas, especially the textile arts of South and Central America. (Peruvian textiles, remember, were one of his life-long passions.) However, he also promoted the arts of native North Americans and indigenous Asian peoples including the Koryak and Amur River Basin cultures. Two design features, “Dress Up Hints from the Aztecs” from the August 31, 1916 issue of *Women’s Wear* (**Fig. 5**) and “Making the Beauty of Peru Serve our Needs” from the April 25, 1917 issue of *Women’s Wear* indicate the primacy of Central and South American textiles promulgated by Crawford. In 1916, he wrote in *Women’s Wear* “The American designers of the pre-Columbian times had no Paris to refer to for their ideas, but they were undismayed by this circumstance and created loveliness from their own innate sense of the beautiful”<sup>7</sup>

Crawford’s advocacy of Andean textiles reflects not only his recognition of their aesthetic richness, but also his concern for utilizing sources unconnected with developments in contemporary European textiles. Artists in Europe were already exploring the power of ethnographic art especially that of Africa as well as Asia, typified by the exotic orientalism of Poiret and Bakst. Crawford sought parallel inspirations for American textile designers through ethnographic art, but from that of the Western hemisphere. To Crawford, these weavings represented the ancient traditions of the New World -- America’s own textile heritage and what better source for the creation of a truly American school of design?

Between 1916 and 1921, many of the leading silk producers responded to Crawford’s efforts by experimenting in their silk lines using museum objects for inspiration. The most enthusiastic response came from H.R. Mallinson and Co., one of the largest and most successful silk manufacturers in New York, which began immediately incorporating museum inspirations into its “Khaki-Cool” and “Pussy Willow” lines of printed silk.<sup>8</sup> However, Crawford’s lessons were not lost on the silk manufacturer, John Wanamaker, either. In 1917, Wanamaker came out with an ambitious line of shantung silks inspired by Mayan art. (**Fig. 6**) Interestingly, an advertisement accompanying the article on Mayan fashions in the March 1917 issue of *The American Silk Journal* suggested a parallel between ancient Mayan culture and contemporary American culture in the “True

American eagle motif of the Maya.”<sup>9</sup>

Pivotal to Crawford’s quest for American textiles was commercial success for aspiring artists. Throughout his campaign, Crawford ardently lobbied manufacturers to support textile artists, not only by purchasing designs, but also by respecting the role of the designer within the textile production process. In one typical article, Crawford made a plea to the textile industry to “give our young people every advantage that artists in other countries have. We must recognize them and make their position as honorable and profitable as it may be anywhere else, or better.”<sup>10</sup>

With that goal in mind, M.D.C. Crawford and E. W. Fairchild formulated the idea of a design contest sponsored by *Women’s Wear*, whereby artists could have their work seen by industry representative and possibly win cash prizes. From 1916 to 1920, a total of five contests for creative textile design were sponsored by *Women’s Wear*, the last four being held under the auspices of the Art Alliance of America. The fifth (and final) contest was held on November 8, 1920. **(Fig. 7)** And over 1,000 artists, representing 34 states and Canada sent in 3,500 designs, and received over \$2300 in prize money.<sup>11</sup>

To the amazement of the judges, many of the entries in the very first *Women’s Wear* Design Contest, held in the Fall of 1916, arrived as actual fabrics instead of works on paper. This situation called for the creation of a new and distinct series called “The Albert Blum Hand Decorated Fabrics” contest.<sup>12</sup> The first Albert Blum Competition was exhibited at the galleries of the Art Alliance of America from May 7 to 28, 1917. Over 130 artists submitted 500 actual fabrics to this competition, all decorated by hand. Batik was, by far, the most prevalent technique and figured in the three prizewinning designs by Hazel B. Slaughter, Helen C. Reed, and Martha Ryther.<sup>13</sup> These designs were illustrated in *Good Furniture* magazine of July 1917 which ran a favorable review of the exhibition. **(Fig. 8)**

Both the *Women’s Wear* Textile Design Contests and the Albert Blum Hand Decorated Fabrics Competitions continued to expand over the years. True to his word, Crawford continued to advocate on behalf of individual textile artists and lobbied the silk manufacturers to purchase designs submitted to the competitions. In the October 24, 1917 issue of *Women’s Wear*, Crawford happily reported that thirty-nine of the designs from the 2nd *Women’s Wear* Design Contest were bought by various textile manufacturers including the designs of Mokoto Nishimura and Andrew Fleury which were purchased by Belding Brothers silk manufacturers. Likewise, the designs of Marie Carr, Alice Hurd, Marguerite Zorach, Bessie Heathcote, and Ilonka Karasz were purchased and reproduced in a line of silks by Mallinson & Co. for display in the store windows of B. Altman & Co. during February of 1918.<sup>14</sup>

Many of the participants in the *Women’s Wear* and Albert Blum contests are now recognized as significant textile artists of the twentieth century. Marguerite Zorach, Ilonka Karasz, Martha Ryther (who went on to work for Mallinson & Co. and Belding Brothers), Marion Dorn, and Ruth Reeves were only a few of the artists who participated

in the contests which also saw the contributions of Hazel Burnham Slaughter, Helen Reed, Arthur Crisp, Coulton Waugh, Mary Tannahill, Zoltan Hecht, and Winold Reiss.

### Did the “Designed in America” Campaign Ultimately Succeed?

Many of the artists associated with the competitions moved in different directions during the 1920s, away from the more literal copying of museum artifacts and incorporating advances in design coming from Europe. The end of the First World War also removed the pressing need for artistic and commercial self-sufficiency. American design did not eclipse Europe’s during the First World War and as Crawford later observed in his book The Ways of Fashion, “The Normandie shuttled so many American buyers back and forth to Paris that she was familiarly known as the 7th Avenue Express.”<sup>15</sup>

However, the “Designed in America” campaign was not without its successes. For one, it established a long and fruitful relationship between designers and museums. The expansion of the design studio at the Brooklyn Museum, eventually led to the establishment of a Design Laboratory in the 1940s. This laboratory later became the nucleus of the collections of the Fashion Institute of Technology, now the Museum at Fashion Institute of Technology which today still serves the New York City design community.

More importantly, the “Designed in America” Campaign was one of the first attempts to understand and define “American” design while putting textile designers at the forefront of a self-conscious movement to reinvigorate the industrial arts.

The *Women’s Wear* and Albert Blum Hand-Decorated Fabrics competitions, themselves, deserve consideration for their role in the development of American textile design. Their importance might even lend comparison with the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s seminal series of industrial art exhibitions starting in 1917 called “The Designer and the Museum”.<sup>16</sup> It is not insignificant that one of the creators of that program, Henry W. Kent, was connected with the earlier formation of the “Designed in America” campaign. Kent was also a judge of the first *Women’s Wear* design contest in 1916, which predated the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s first exhibition by one year.

Lastly, Crawford’s advocacy of ethnographic collections prompted many artists to explore new design aesthetics, some with lasting implications.<sup>17</sup> While it must be asserted that Crawford’s thinking was steeped very much in the historicism of the period, his lauding of the merits of ethnographic collections, nevertheless, brought about the creation of some surprisingly bold and “modern” textiles. In the 1920s and 1930s, Crawford turned his efforts more and more to activity within the collections of the Brooklyn Museum and was instrumental in the formation of their Design Laboratory. He remained a committed champion of American textile design until his death in 1949.

## NOTES

1. William Laurel Harris, "The Varied Industries-What Germany Teaches Us," *Good Furniture* 4, (November 1914): 77.
2. Morris De Camp Crawford, *The Heritage of Cotton* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1924), 197-200.
3. "Morris Crawford: Fabrics Authority," *New York Times*, 25 June 1949.
4. Morris De Camp Crawford, "Creative Textile Art and the American Museum," *The American Museum Journal* 17, no. 4 (April 1917): 255.
5. Stewart Culin, "Statement to the Director," Records of the Office of the Director (W.H. Fox), 1913-33, File #27(2), Department of Ethnology, The Brooklyn Museum Archives.
6. "Series of Photographs from the First Exhibition of American Textiles, Costumes, and Mechanical Processes," *The American Museum Journal* 19, no. 12 (November 1919): 631-649.
7. Crawford, "Embroidery Ideas from Stencils," *Women's Wear*, November 1916.
8. Crawford, "Creative Textile Art":255.
9. While the Maya and Aztec themes explored by these manufacturers reflected a conscious effort on their part to address Crawford's concerns for a national design identity, these subjects also contained a certain exotic and novel appeal which they commercially exploited.
10. Crawford, "Artist Craftsmen Now in Garment Industry," *Women's Wear*, 18 July 1917.
11. Crawford, *The Heritage of Cotton*, 200-201.
12. *Ibid.*, 203.
13. "Textile Exhibition of the Art Alliance of America Encouraging Practical Art in the Textile Industry," *Good Furniture* 9, no. 1, (July 1917): 7.
14. Crawford, "Silk Designs Win Recognition," *Women's Wear*, 14 February 1918.
15. Crawford, *The Ways of Fashion* (New York: Fairchild Publishing Co., 1948), 18. Crawford was actually quoting the fashion retailer, H. Stanley Marcus.
16. For a more complete discussion of the "Designer and the Museum" exhibitions, see Christine Wallace Laidlaw, "The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Modern Design: 1917-1929," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, 1875-1945* (Spring 1988).
17. Ruth Reeves, Crawford's protégée, would continue to explore Andean themes in her textile designs throughout the rest of her career. See Whitney Blausen, "Textile Designs of Ruth Reeves," (M.A. Thesis, S.U.N.Y., Fashion Institute of Technology, 1992).

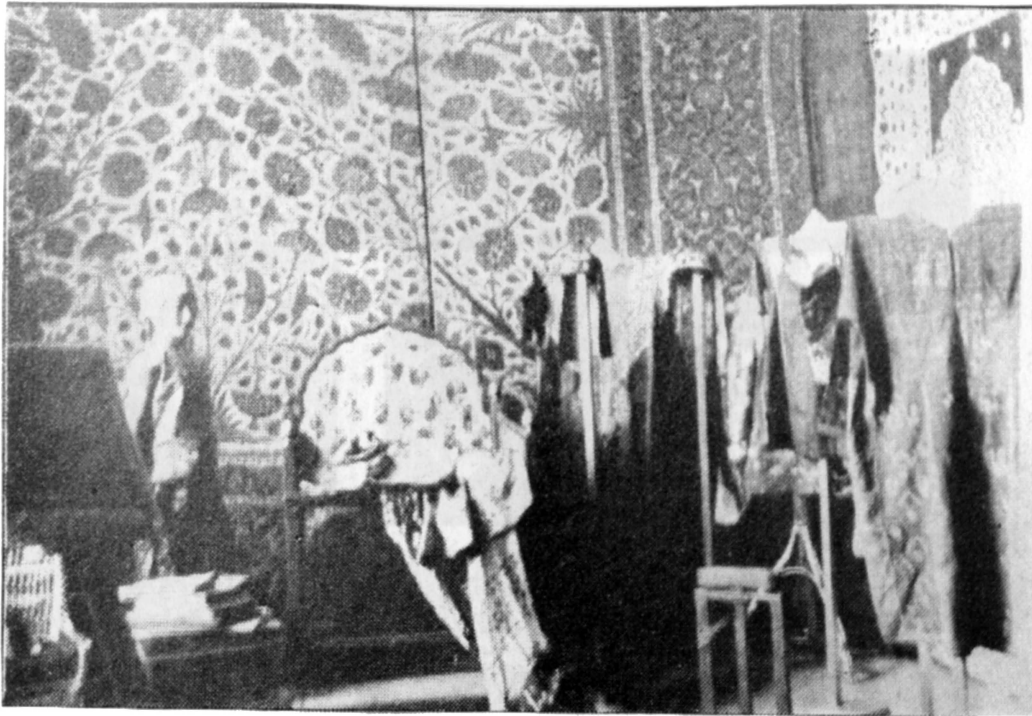


**Fig. 1** -Morris De Camp Crawford at his upstate New York home.  
Photo courtesy of Morris De Camp Crawford, Jr.



**Fig. 2** - Cheney Brothers silks inspired by Peruvian and Koryak collections at the American Museum of Natural History. Reprinted from, Crawford, "Creative Textile Art and the American Museum," *The American Museum Journal* 17, no. 4, (April 1917): 255.





**Fig. 3** -The Study Room at The Brooklyn Museum about 1921. Reprinted from, M.D.C. Crawford, *The Heritage of Cotton* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1924), Plate 21.



**Fig. 4** -David Aaron embroideries installation at the Natural History Museum, 1919. Reprinted from, "Series of Photographs from the First Exhibition of American Textiles, Costumes, and Mechanical Processes," *The American Museum Journal* 19, no.12 (November 1919): 631-649.



**Women's Wear Fifth Annual Design Contest**  
 EXHIBITED BY  
**Art Alliance of America**  
 10 East 47th Street, New York  
**OPEN TO EVERYONE - \$2,325 IN PRIZES**

| FIRST PRIZES \$200 |              | SECOND PRIZES \$100 |              | THIRD PRIZES \$50 |              | SPECIAL PRIZES                                    |               |
|--------------------|--------------|---------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|---|---------------|
| Blue Silk          | \$200        | Blue Silk           | \$100        | Blue Silk         | \$50         | Technical Assistance                              | \$100         |
| Orange Silk        | \$200        | Orange Silk         | \$100        | Orange Silk       | \$50         | Materials (Maximum 10 yards of 3 1/2 inch fabric) | \$100         |
| Green Silk         | \$200        | Green Silk          | \$100        | Green Silk        | \$50         | Pattern Paper                                     | \$50          |
| Red Silk           | \$200        | Red Silk            | \$100        | Red Silk          | \$50         | Special Panel                                     | \$50          |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>\$800</b> | <b>Total</b>        | <b>\$400</b> | <b>Total</b>      | <b>\$200</b> | <b>Grand Total</b>                                | <b>\$1500</b> |

Designs received up to and including Nov. 28th, 1920  
 Jury meets Saturday, Nov. 28th, 1920  
 Prize City Thursday, Nov. 25th, 1920  
 Open to Trade Friday, Nov. 26th, 1920  
 General Public Saturday, Nov. 27th, 1920

**CONDITIONS**  
 Designs must be submitted separately for the contest no design previously shown will be accepted. Designs should be marked on the back with the name and address of designer and price of design.  
 Designer should show what fabric pattern or all fabric or whatever else is used.  
 Designs may be submitted in any medium that is suitable in that price and audience will be given to designs prepared with propriety and speed.  
 All designs remain the property of the designer. The Art Alliance keeps in stock approximately 75-100 yards of material in 3 1/2 inch width. Designs may be made of 100 yards maximum of 3 1/2 inch fabric. All designers accepted by the Art Alliance will receive 75-100 yards of material in 3 1/2 inch width of fabric for their designs.

**Fig. 7** - Announcement for fifth Women's Wear Design Contest. Reprinted from Crawford, *The Heritage of Cotton*, Plate 21.

**FIRST PRIZE - BATIK DESIGN ON SILK IN TWO SHADES OF RED**  
 HAZEL BERNHAM SLAUGHTER

**THIRD PRIZE - BATIK ON SILK**  
 COLORS: BLUE, GREEN AND WHITE  
 MARILYN RYTHUR

**SUPPLEMENTARY PRIZE FOR TIE-DYEING - COLORS RED AND BROWN**  
 BILLY NORTHROP

PRIZE-WINNING DESIGNS FROM THE TEXTILE EXHIBITION OF THE ART ALLIANCE OF AMERICA

**Fig. 8** - Prizewinning fabrics from the First Albert Blum Hand Decorated Textiles Competition exhibited at the Art Alliance of America May 7-28, 1917. Reprinted from, "Textile Exhibition at the Art Alliance of America Encouraging Practical Art in the Textile Industry," *Good Furniture* 9, no. 1, (July 1917): 5-9.