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FROM BOHEMIAN TO BOURGEOIS: AMERICAN BATIK IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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In 1919 Pieter Mijer wrote in his influential book Batiks and How to Make Them: "Batik is still a comparatively recent importation; brought here some ten years ago, it was met with absolute incomprehension and lack of interest, but its real merit as a means of decorating fabrics has earned it a place in the industrial art of the nation and year by year it is gaining wider recognition."¹

This paper briefly considers the rise and fall in popularity of batik in America in the period Mijer indicated: how it changed from being a foreign import chiefly seen in museums with ethnographic collections to being a high fashion fabric with a rather brief span of popularity. It also investigates the role of certain American artists, designers, educators, and department stores in the appropriation and transformation of this unfamiliar technique and its associated motifs by the textile industry as a commercial venture.

Although the technique of decorating textiles by applying a wax resist between successive dyeings was practised in different parts of the world, including Japan, Javanese batiks were the type most Europeans and Americans identified with the process. A few enlightened Europeans, such as Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, recognized the richness of the Javanese textile tradition early. Raffles brought a large collection of batik textiles back to England in the early nineteenth century.² In turn, English printed textiles and machine-produced cloth for use in the printing process soon arrived in Java, where they had an impact on the production of native textiles. Throughout its history, batik has evolved through the meeting of different cultures and technologies.

The first European artists to experiment with the medium in the 1880s and 1890s were the Dutch, inspired by the collection of Javanese batiks amassed in Holland through trade and colonization in the East Indies. Displays of Javanese batiks in Dutch museums and at the 1883 International Colonial Exposition in Amsterdam were a particular inspiration for Dutch artists to work in batik. Javanese batiks, especially the brilliant costumes of puppets, caused a sensation among a wider European audience when exhibited by the Dutch at the Paris International Exposition in 1900.³ Dutch artists, among them G. W. Dijsselhof, J. Thorn Prikker, and S. Jessurun de Mesquita exhibited their own batiks at the 1902 Turin International Exposition.⁴ The most influential Dutch batik artist was

Chris Lebeau (1878-1945), who established an atelier in Haarlem in 1902, and taught the batik technique to other European artists at the School of Fine Arts in Haarlem.⁵ Lebeau's works clearly show colors deriving from authentic Indonesian examples, whose sinuous forms appealed to the Art Nouveau sensibility. One of the most celebrated European female batik artists was Madame Marguerite Pangon, who studied the technique in Haarlem before setting up her atelier in Paris, where she produced luxurious shawls, dresses, cushions, curtains, and lampshades. Her batiks were also displayed in the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in Paris.⁶ Pangon's financial success indicated the commercial potential of this artistic fabric.

In America, authentic Javanese batiks began to enter American museum collections in the late nineteenth century as ethnographical textiles. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, was one of the first to acquire such textiles, thanks to the forward-looking collecting policy of Charles G. Loring, first director of the Museum, and Denman W. Ross, Harvard Professor, Museum trustee, and an avid collector. On a trip to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, they purchased five batiks from the Javanese Village for the Museum's collection. Ross added sixty-six more batiks after his 1911 trip to Indonesia.⁷ The Museum's policy of allowing designers from the local textile industries to study from the collection gradually brought batik to the attention of industrial manufacturers, and this contact between museums and industry proved fruitful later in New York, as this paper will investigate.

A number of young American artists soon became interested in the new technique. One legacy of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century was the willingness of more so-called "fine" artists to explore techniques and media with "craft" connotations, such as embroidery, a very familiar technique that underwent a revival in the last quarter of the century. Batik was a much more alien phenomenon for Americans. But, like embroidery, batik appealed to those who still discriminated between craft and "fine" art, partly because it produced unique images rather than multiples and required similar handskills to drawing. Thus it gained a following in the wider artistic community.

One of the first American artists to work in batik was Marguerite Thompson Zorach (1887-1968). Like others of her generation, Marguerite Thompson made the obligatory artistic pilgrimage to Europe between 1908 and 1911, studying first at a traditional academic school in Paris before finding her niche among the avant-garde at La Palette school, where she was a pupil of John Duncan Fergusson and Jacques-Emile Blanche.⁸ Marguerite was especially attracted to the color of the Fauve painters whom she admired in Paris, and it was this love of color that informed her later embroidered pictures as well as her paintings.

While it is possible that Zorach's interest in batik was piqued by work she saw in Paris, such as that produced by Mme Pangon and Lucienne Cajot, it is more likely that Zorach's return trip to the United States may have provided her with more authentic inspiration. Between 1911-1912, with her aunt and a companion, she spent seven months voyaging through Egypt, Palestine, India, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Korea, and Japan, countries with outstanding textile traditions, on her way home to California. Again, as a colorist, she appreciated the exotic scenes she witnessed, sketching and keeping a travel diary in which she made illustrated notes on local dress and textiles. Marguerite returned from Indonesia with implements for making batik and it is probable that she taught herself the technique from a manual and from watching others.⁹

On her arrival in New York, she married the sculptor William Zorach, and the young couple figured prominently in the artistic life of Greenwich Village in the 'teens. Both artists exhibited in the New York Armory Show, and both received the accolade of being vilified by the conventional press for their "shocking" paintings.¹⁰

Being frighteningly poor, yet desperately artistic, Marguerite used her skills to decorate the Zorachs' clothing and home. From William's autobiography, we learn that she made most of the family's clothes (except for shoes and William's suits), and several of her batik patterned clothes still exist.¹¹ A brown and cream jacket with stylized figures and floral and animal motifs, now in the National Museum of American Art, reveals Zorach's study of authentic Javanese designs. "Bohemian" artistic dress was, in fact, a practical necessity for impoverished artists like the Zorachs.

A scarf with horses and nude figures (Figure 1) by Zorach (now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; 68.592), and a set of three batik wall hangings (now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 1976.252.1-3) date from the period 1918-1920. The hangings may have been theatrical backdrops for the Provincetown Players, Eugene O'Neill's avant-garde theater group in both Provincetown and Manhattan, for whom the Zorachs made sets, costumes, and programs, and with whom William even acted, occasionally.

By now batik was something of a craze among young New York artists. Just as the Fauves and Cubists in Europe were turning to African sculpture and other non-western art for their inspiration rather than to the Old Masters, so too were young American artists seeking to free themselves from the academic tradition. In the field of American textile design, young designers were likewise being encouraged to study more unusual sources of design in American museum collections, such as historic textiles, especially non-European examples, of which Javanese batik was but one type. A small group of progressive educators and writers, led by M.D.C. Crawford, debated the future of American textile



Marguerite Zorach (American, 1887-1968). Scarf, about 1918; silk, batik; 64.7 x139 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Miss Alice B. Hornby 68.592
Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

design and manufacture.¹² They wanted to direct the talent of American artists toward industrial design, in order to encourage greater originality. Practically, they hoped to free American commercial production of textiles from its heavy dependence on European (and predominantly French) examples. The disruption of European trade and production by the First World War added to the urgency of Crawford's mission. These educators also sought to improve the status and morale of American designers, who were seldom accorded much credit by or received adequate rewards from their employers. Crawford, a Research Associate in Textiles at the American Museum of Natural History, and Stewart Culin of the Brooklyn Museum, welcomed artists and designers to their institutions to study their collections, organized special exhibitions of so-called primitive art, and wrote and lectured tirelessly about their beliefs. Their campaign had immediate results: as early as 1915, H.R. Mallinson & Co. produced printed silks inspired by Aztec and Inca art, and in 1917 the firm of Wanamakers showed fashionable dress embroidered with Maya motifs by artists who had turned to these new sources of design inspiration.¹³

Between 1916 and the early 1920s a number of important competitions were organized to stimulate innovation in American textile design. One series was sponsored by Women's Wear and the other was known as the Alfred Blum Hand-Decorated Textiles Competition. These competitions were intended to attract the attention of commercial textile manufacturers, who could improve the aesthetic merit of their products by employing some of the successful competitors. Judges of the competitions included representatives from the manufacturing sector, including E. Irving Hanson of H.R. Mallinson & Co., and Albert Blum of the United Dye Works.

Batiks were shown by many artists in the competition exhibitions, and prize-winning pieces were reported and illustrated in both textile trade publications and the art press, including the American Silk Journal, Women's Wear, Good Furniture, and the American Magazine of Art. The designs were then displayed in New York museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum, which exhibited the 1916 Women's Wear designs. Batiks took the first 3 prizes in the May 1917 Albert Blum Hand-Decorated Textiles Competition. Awards were made to Hazel Burnham Slaughter, Helen C. Reed, and Martha Ryther.¹⁴ Of the Second Annual Alfred Blum contest in January 1918, Crawford wrote: "Batik, as usual, held the center of attraction. The freedom of this technique in the hands of the artist permits of the most unusual and beautiful effects."¹⁵ A more prosaic observer and representative of industry, Edward L. Mayer, complained rather stodgily about the batik artists' "temptation to run riot in this technique regardless of utilitarian considerations."¹⁶

The display of authentic Javanese batiks in New York in this period also helped to familiarize a wider audience with

these foreign designs. About one such exhibition, a critic wrote: "Batik is not, as many persons think, akin to ultra-modern art, but has an intensely practical application, and its products are used in the decoration of the clothes worn in Java, as well as in screens, hangings, and other decorative uses."¹⁷

As early as 1913, a brief article by Amy Mali Hicks instructed readers of House & Garden who were not professional artists on how to try their hand at the technique, since, she wrote, "A great many fabrics may be used, and a great many interesting designs worked out without especial talent or technical training."¹⁸ The technique was especially in vogue for "dress fabrics, furniture covers, table covers." Others learned the technique by taking classes in art schools.

The most widely used "how-to" batik book in America was Pieter Mijer's 1919 work, which provided clear and detailed instructions for amateurs and artists who wished to learn the skill. One writer credited much of the success of batik in America to Mijer himself, "a Dutch artist, who learned the art in Java and brought it back with him to America. It is wholly to Mr. Myer's [sic] insistence upon its true worth in the face of cool incomprehension and his willingness to explain his craft and teach his technique to others that today we owe this important addition to American art."¹⁹ Mijer's book also provided the reader with a history of batik in Indonesia and its rise to popularity in Europe in the early twentieth century. Mijer himself warned that batik had already become something of a fad: "It has been in danger of getting into the class of transient 'cults' and becoming a fashionable pastime with a rise and fall similar to the craze for doing peasant wood-carving, burnt-wood work or sweater knitting. But...its real merit has saved it from becoming just modish amusement."²⁰

Batik garments, originally worn only by the "bohemian" artists who made them, were also popular among actresses and dancers who wore them as stage costumes for shows with exotic themes. Batik clothing was sold by small enterprises, such as the Flambeau Weavers and other fashionable little shops in New York that offered "artistic" dress. Among their creations were two indoor outfits for 1918, one described as "an idyllic harem costume of Javanese batik" and the other as "a gold-and-green changeable satin worn with an iridescent batik chiffon tea coat."²¹ The Flambeau Weavers were praised for their successful use of domestic dyes to reproduce the rich earth colors admired in authentic Javanese batiks.

Almost immediately, the more progressive textile manufacturers such as H.R. Mallinson & Co. and Cheney Brothers recognized the commercial possibilities of batik textiles, especially for clothing. The taste for exoticism in textiles and dress had developed in fashionable America in the early 'teens, encouraged by events such as the display of the Ballets Russes costumes in New York, news

from Paris about Paul Poiret's fashions inspired by the Orient, and frequent articles (mainly by Crawford) in Women's Wear about exotic design sources. Both Cheney Brothers and H.R. Mallinson experimented with commercially-produced versions of hand-made batiks. The November 1917 issue of the American Silk Journal showed Cheney Brothers's new printed silks with batik effects, which were hailed as "an original interpretation of the batik prints, the inspiration for which was found in the original Javanese hand-dyed batiks. There are eight color combinations...each pattern admirably adapted to costume use and also for furnishing...."²²

And in Feb 1918, Crawford waxed enthusiastic in Women's Wear that Cheney Brothers were about to place on the market "a mechanical imitation of the ancient Batik work. The process is the result of a series of careful experiments in the mills at South Manchester."²³ Crawford quoted Horace Cheney as saying "nothing like it has ever been placed on the market...we feel we have produced mechanically the same feeling of softness that makes the hand processed fabrics so beautiful ... not only in foulards but in multi-colored prints as well." Crawford pronounced that "if the batik designs made by artists can be perfectly reproduced by machines it will be a splendid thing for the artists and industry as well. It is a hopeful sign that the technical genius of the country is concerning itself rather with the production of quality than in an effort to meet the problems of price and quantity." For once, Crawford's dreams of the perfect marriage of art and industry were almost realized in these batik textiles.

But not everyone raved about some of the work that Cheney was producing. Frances Gifford commented on the "crackley" effect: "The native Javanese workman very properly considers 'crackle' an evidence of bad craftsmanship. In America, 'crackle' work is bought by credulous people at prices far above its true value on the assurance that they are getting the only genuine batik."²⁴

While firms such as the United Piece Dyeworks produced printed batik silks by a resist method, we know that Cheney Brothers produced such imitations of batiks on a roller-printing machine, with artificially produced "craquille" effects.²⁵

The manufacturers recognized that it might help their sales if they familiarized the public with the new fabrics and designs by giving them appealing names. In February 1917, H.R. Mallinson advertised: "With the batik idea developed to the utmost, there has just been introduced...a rich crepe fabric with brilliant iridescent colorings under the catchy name of 'Hero Crepe Batik.'" The motifs of "stripes, circles, spirals, blocks, etc." (which were not particularly Javanese-looking) were declared to be "especially suitable for suits, skirts, hats, bags, parasols, and trimmings."²⁶

As Crawford had hoped, Mallinson hired a prize-winning artist from the Art Alliance competitions for their design studio. Martha Ryther, who specialised in batiks, joined their design team in March 1917. This firm was particularly committed to the new technique. Large-scale pictorial batiks designed by Arthur Crisp and executed by the Mijer studio decorated the walls of Mallinson's showrooms in 1918 and 1919. A group of these batiks depicting the silk industry was praised as "the highest development in the art of batik dyeing."²⁷

The best department stores also played a substantial role in promoting batiks. Crawford had hailed the retail store as the "laboratory of good taste," and in 1919, Marshall Field & Company in Chicago organized a travelling exhibition and sale of over 120 batik textiles and costumes designed by young American artists.²⁸ Bonwit Teller purchased a prize-winning batik from the December 1916 competition for their 1917 line of block-printed underwear.²⁹ One of Wanamaker's lavish batik displays in March 1918 was reported thus in Women's Wear: "The silk rotunda at Wanamakers takes one to Japan, or perhaps some other Oriental country, today. Batik motives and tie-dyed silks are the features and are scattered about in profusion but with a blending of color which emphasizes their beauties."³⁰ Clearly, in this context batik was no longer linked to one specific country, being rather more vaguely identified as "Oriental." Wanamaker's display included "Georgettes with Batik designs, with 18 different choices for \$3 a yard; Batik satin crackle, plain colors only, \$2.85; Batik pongee crackle, hand made, 12 color combinations, \$3;" as well as "Batik originals, hand made, \$5 to \$100 each." Several samples of these textiles were donated by Wanamaker's to the Smithsonian Institution in 1918 and are now among the collections of the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC.

A February 1918 headline in Women's Wear signalled the triumph of "fake" batik in a seasonal bastion of the bourgeoisie: "Plain or Batik Smocks Worn at Palm Beach."³¹ The writer explained: "Since Batik art is better understood and accepted, there is a noticeable growing admiration evinced for real Batik or otherwise. As the real Batik entails much labor, the results must necessarily be costly and at times even the best work shows traces of defects." Commenting that the year before the prices for real batik smocks sent to Palm Beach "were exorbitant," the author noted that "this season so many novelties are offered that the real Batik has found a strong rival in the manufactured fabrics selling for more reasonable prices." Thus cheaper prices, and the suggestion that manufactured versions avoided the "traces of defects" that were likely to occur in hand-batiked fabrics appear to have won many consumers over to the commercially-manufactured versions. By now, batik was seen as just generically "Oriental," the report concluding that "Much can be gleaned from Oriental

inspiration and done in design." Again, the National Museum of American History is fortunate to have in its collections several examples of the type of sheer silk imitation batik that might have been used for the type of smock seen in Palm Beach. One sample (63914, cat. no. 4144), manufactured by H.R. Mallinson and marked "Mallinsons Indestructible Voile," is block-printed en forme to provide the bodice and sleeves of a dress. The piece was donated by Mallinson, through M.D.C. Crawford, in 1919.

But, opinion differed as to the desirability of commercially-produced batik patterns. Some critics were vehement that machine-made versions could not replace hand-made batiks. In September 1919, one writer commented: "Apropos of prints -- the current exhibition of batiks at the Bush building has pretty well demonstrated to the print goods producer that there is no rivalry there as the true batik can never be commercialized, but the fine old patterns, notably those from the Metropolitan and Natural History Museums may prove a stimulus in design."³² Clearly, the author had not been frequenting the design competitions.

A sign that the commercial popularity of batik was on the wane came as early as July 1919, when the American Silk Journal reported that: "Prints, for which the demand has greatly exceeded the supply this year, will carry over to the Spring. Batik designs have been a failure from the buyer's viewpoint and sharply defined conventional patterns and Chinese motifs in high colors will be most salable."³³ Batik dresses had already peaked in popularity. The bottom line in the fashion industry was still profit.

Although batik fashions revived in the 1920s in Europe and America, their novelty had been eclipsed, and batik designs took their place in the repertoire of miscellaneous styles that were vaguely labelled "Oriental." Designers continued to plunder this multicultural resource. While the fashion industry moved on to other innovations, American artists, notably Lydia Bush-Brown,³⁴ continued to explore the use of batik well into the 1920s.

1. Pieter Mijer, Batiks and How to Make Them (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1919), p. 24.
2. Inger McCabe Elliott, Batik, Fabled Cloth of Java, New York: Potter, Inc., 1984, p. 38.
3. One writer commented that the costumes of the Javanese puppets "se bariolaient de dessins aux couleurs vives, d'une délicieuse fantaisie ornement décorative... c'était du batik." (Unpaginated, undated, Le Batik Français -- Madame Pangon -- 64 rue la Boétie -- Exposition Permanente.) For information on the batiks at the Paris International Exposition of 1900, see G.P. Rouffaer, ed. Exposition Universelle à Paris. Guide à travers la section des Indes-Néerlandaise (Groupe XVII colonisation). (La Haye: 1900); Roger Marx, La Décoration et les industries d'art à

- l'Exposition Universelle de 1900. (Paris: Librairie Ch. Delagrave, 1901), p. 110, n.10.
4. See Eerste Internationale Tentoonstelling van Moderne Decoratieve Kunst te Turijn in 1902: Verslag van de Nederlandsche Afdeeling (Haarlem: 1902), p. 62.
 5. See Mechtild de Bois, Chris Lebeau 1878-1945 (Haarlem: Drentsmuseum, Assen and Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, 1987).
 6. Batiks by Marguerite Pangon, Marguerite Blotnitzki, and Lucienne Cajot were shown in the 8th Salon des Artistes Décorateurs, February 22-March 31, 1913.
 7. Susan MacMillan Arensberg, Javanese Batiks (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, undated), Introduction.
 8. See Roberta K. Tarbell, Marguerite Zorach: The Early Years, 1908-1920 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1973), pp. 15-26.
 9. Nicola J. Shilliam, "Emerging Identity: American Textile Artists in the Early Twentieth Century." In Marianne Carlano and Nicola J. Shilliam, Early Modern Textiles: From Arts and Crafts to Art Deco (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1993), p. 36.
 10. Roberta K. Tarbell, Marguerite Zorach: The Early Years, p. 36.
 11. William Zorach, Art Is My Life: The Autobiography of William Zorach (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1967), p. 53. Many of Marguerite Zorach's batik clothes and textiles are preserved in the National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC.
 12. See M.D.C. Crawford, The Heritage of Cotton (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1924), pp. 197-212.
 13. "Maya Designs the Latest Vogue." American Silk Journal 36 (March 1917), p. 39.
 14. The American Silk Journal 36 (May 1917), p. 49.
 15. Women's Wear January 21, 1918, p. 1.
 16. Ibid, p. 17.
 17. "Exhibition of Batik Work," The American Magazine of Art 10 (September 1919), pp. 446-447.
 18. Amy Mali Hicks, "Batik, Its Making and Its Use," House & Garden November 1913, p. 289.
 19. Frances Gifford, "How Batiks Are Made." American Silk Journal 37 (May 1918), p. 67.
 20. Pieter Mijer, Batiks, p. 24.
 21. See illustrations in American Silk Journal 37 (January 1918), p. 47.
 22. American Silk Journal 36 (November 1917), p. 34.
 23. M.D.C. Crawford, Women's Wear February 20, 1918, p. 1.
 24. Frances Gifford "How Batiks Are Made." American Silk Journal 37 (May 1918), p. 71.
36, no. 5 (May 1917), p. 49.
 25. Karl E.W. Mueller, "The Genesis of Silk Printing." American Silk Journal 46 (September 1927), p. 51, illustrates an example of a Cheney imitation batik with strong "craquille" effects.

26. American Silk Journal 37 (February 1918), p. 36.
27. According to the American Silk Journal 37 (April 1918), p. 57, "The Sorceress" designed by Arthur Crisp and executed by the "Myer [sic] studio" was in the Mallinson salesroom, while batik panels depicting "The Silk Industry" in Mallinson's showrooms were illustrated in American Silk Journal 37 (September 1918), p. 60.
28. M.D.C. Crawford, Batik Exhibition: Marshall Field and Company (New York: Marshall Field and Company, undated, unpaginated).
29. Women's Wear May 2, 1917, p. 1.
30. Ibid, March 6, 1918, p. 9.
31. Women's Wear February 20, 1918, p. 1.
32. "Exhibition of Batik Work" American Magazine of Art 10 (September 1919) p. 467.
33. American Silk Journal 38 (July 1919), p. 44.
34. On Lydia Bush-Brown, see Gillian Moss, "Textiles of the American Arts and Crafts Movement." In Linda Parry, William Morris and the Arts & Crafts Movement (New York: Portland Books, 1989), pp. 21-22.