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The Museum at FIT

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WESLEY SIMPSON: DESIGNER, STYLIST AND ENTREPRENEUR

By Lynn Felsher

Over 20 years ago, The Museum at FIT received an anonymous gift of approximately 165 small textile samples and 27 scarves from the company, Wesley Simpson Custom Fabrics, Inc.¹ The textiles dating from the late 1930s through the 1940s were designed for moderately priced women's apparel. Printed on rayon crepe grounds, they were typical of the period, loose painterly florals, paisleys, conversationals, and small geometric, abstract and stripe patterns on light-colored grounds or discharge printed on dark grounds. The Metropolitan Museum of Art² and The Brooklyn Museum of Art³ also have substantial holdings of Wesley Simpson Custom Fabrics, and an examination of all three institutions allows for a fairly comprehensive picture of the company.

Fortuitously the textiles in the FIT collection were accompanied by a small archive of ads from newspapers and fashion magazines, promotional photographs and press clippings dating from 1944 to February 1949. What the press material revealed about the company was that spanning the immediate post-WWII period from 1945 to 1949, a concerted effort was made to bring the company's name and its textiles to the attention of the American consumer. Promotional ads appeared in newspapers throughout the United States and Canada, linking the sale of Wesley Simpson Custom Fabrics with specific department stores. Ads appeared in *The New York Sun*, *Indianapolis Star*, the *Atlanta Constitution*, *Los Angeles Examiner*, the *El Paso Desert News*, and *The Gazette* in Montreal—to name a few. Simpson's strategy was to sell his textiles in one particular retail store in a given city. According to an industry publication, *Retailing Home Furnishings*, he had by March of 1947 a customer list of approximately 350 stores.⁴

The company's rayon textiles were priced to appeal to the moderate market and sold in the home-sewing departments of stores for \$1.19 to \$3.98 a yard.⁵ In comparison, Simpson's printed silks were \$7.95 to \$9.98 a yard in 1946.⁶

The press clippings offer an all too brief a glimpse into an American company. Where did Wesley Simpson Custom Fabrics, Inc. fit in the textile industry and where was his place between the manufacturers and converters of this period? More to the point, how long was the company in business? And what type of operation did Simpson run? Again the ads point the way, for they show an over-the-counter or retail business, selling yardage at economical prices, (as already mentioned), but there were also ads from *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Mademoiselle*, *Glamour*, and *American Fabrics*, linking Simpson's fabrics with many of the better American designers and dress houses, including Hattie Carnegie, Adrian, Tina Leser, Adele Simpson, Nettie Rosenstein, and Herbert Sondheim. There are other ads for a line of inexpensive furnishing fabrics that

¹ The Museum at FIT, X365.1-46.

² The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Antonio Ratti Center, 45.132.1-5, and The Costume Institute, LY50.86.1-28, LY 55.46.1-23, LY55.70.1-23, LY56.32, and LY56.48.1-19.

³ The Brooklyn Museum of Art, 53.261.

⁴ "Simpson Enters Decorative Field," *Retailing Home Furnishings*, March 1947.

⁵ Advertisements, *Indianapolis Star*, 19 January 1947 and *Toledo Blade*, 14 May 1947.

⁶ Advertisements, *Indianapolis Star*, 20 October 1946 and *Lincoln Star*, 31 October 1946.

Simpson introduced in 1946. These were also sold by the yard, and as ready-made slipcovers, bedspreads and draperies for the newly emerging homeowner and her family.⁷

Two very brief obituaries on Simpson appeared in *The New York Times*⁸ and *Women's Wear Daily*.⁹ He was born in New York City in 1903, and died in 1975 at the age of 72. He married the designer Adele Smithline in 1931, had a textile converting business, then a factoring company, Simpson Factors, Inc., which he subsequently sold in the early 60s to The Diner's Club. And after retiring he was a consultant to The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

To fill in more of the blanks, I interviewed Simpson's daughter, Joan Raines and Rosalie Stahl, who worked for Simpson in the 1940s.¹⁰ From them I learned that Wesley Simpson had completed high school in New York City, his father was a judge and his mother owned a millinery shop. For roughly 10 years, from 1919 or 1920, he was employed as a salesman for Cheney Bros., selling textiles to dress companies in New York City's garment center. It was here that he met his future wife, Adele Simpson née Smithline, a designer for Mary Lee, Inc. After a 3-week courtship, they married in 1931 and attempted to go into business together, quickly realized that it was either going to be marriage or business—the marriage won.

Simpson probably established his own business as a textile converter around 1932 or 1933 at the height of the depression. A ledger in the collection of The Brooklyn Museum of Art dating from December 1941 to February 1944 shows that Simpson was supplying memo samples or sample yardage of fabrics to some of the better Seventh Avenue design houses, Davidow, Inc., Mary Lee, Inc., David Crystal, Hattie Carnegie, Townley Frocks whose designer was Claire McCardell, Herbert Sondheim and Nettie Rosenstein.

According to Joan Raines, her father had a staff of 8 and a business partner, George Pretzfeld, in charge of production. Whereas he did all the selling and directed the design studio—acting as chief stylist. As the stylist, he would have set the design direction and color palette for each season as well as purchasing outside art work as we will see.

Wesley Simpson Custom Fabrics, Inc. was a textile converting company. A textile converter produced its own textile designs, whether in-house or purchased from freelance designers. Not having its own printing facility, a converter would contract out the actual printing to one of the many plants, which at the time were located in the northeast and south.

⁷ These were probably the least successful from a design or artistic perspective. Employing the same paradigm as he had for his apparel fabrics, the focus was the moderate or volume market. The fabrics sold for \$1.59 to \$2.39 a yard and were adapted from several apparel patterns. See MFIT Wesley Simpson press clippings, 1946-1947.

⁸ "Wesley Simpson, Designer and Textile Executive, 72," *New York Times*, 9 September 1975.

⁹ *Women's Wear Daily*, 9 September 1975, p. 23.

¹⁰ Joan Raines and Rosalie Stahl, interview by author, 12 December 2001, New York, The Museum at FIT, New York.

The company had five departments, or in a way 5 different sales markets. The departments were: the over-the-counter fabrics sold by the yard, a second over-the-counter line was linked to specific *Vogue* and *McCall's* dress patterns, a better-priced line of couture fabrics, sold wholesale to fashion designers and dress manufacturers, scarves, and for a brief 2-year period from 1946 to 1947, furnishing fabrics. Though there was some overlapping between departments, and designs first produced in rayon in 1944 and 1945 were re-introduced in 1948, printed on cotton grounds or re-interpreted as furnishing fabrics.

After 1949, the company ceased advertising.¹¹ It is not clear when exactly Simpson closed his business. His daughter was uncertain and thought it was in the early 50s. However, based on research at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Costume Institute and at The Brooklyn Museum of Art, I would place the company's closing to early 1950. This conclusion is based on assessing two sizable donations Simpson made in late 1950 to The Brooklyn Museum and the Costume Institute of what appears to be most of the company's inventory of original painted textile designs for apparel, drapery and scarves, original scarf and drapery designs by several artists who worked for Simpson, including Salvador Dali, Marcel Vertès, James Reynolds, Ludwig Bemelmans, and Tillett. Over 110 bound sample books with fabric samples and colorways, scarves, press clippings and miscellaneous records.¹² It is just not conceivable for a company to give away what amounted to a record of their entire production without concluding that they were closing their doors permanently.

His next venture was as a factor or in today's parlance a venture capitalist, lending money to textile and garment companies on a short-term basis, in order for these companies to purchase materials for next season's line. After selling Simpson Factors, Inc. to Diner's Club in the early 1960s, he formed a company to market and sell his wife's perfume.

Simpson's bread and butter business was his line of moderately priced fabrics sold by the yard. At the same time he pursued other avenues of production. Being a converter in the post-WWII economy and aware of the marketplace and its trends, he looked for new ways to increase his market share and distinguish his fabrics from those of his competitors. The post WWII period was one of tumultuous energy and growth; even though rationing of materials did not entirely end until the late 40s, developing new ways to increase sales revenue has always been the mantra of any business. One such strategy or trend were artist-designed fabrics that appeared in the U.S. beginning around 1947.

In an article by Dilys Blum, soon to be published in *Disentangling Textiles*, from Middlesex University Press,¹³ she presents several reasons why a receptive market for "artist-designed" textiles developed in the immediate post WWII period and also why

¹¹ See *American Fabrics*, Spring 1949, p. 18, and *American Fabrics*, Fall 1949, p. 15.

¹² The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Costume Institute, LY50.86 painted textile designs and textiles, donated by Wesley Simpson, additional donations LY55.46, LY55.70, and LY56.32 also donated by Simpson of painted textile designs, textiles, scarves, and sample books. The Brooklyn Museum of Art initial loan in 1950 of 111 sample books, painted textile designs, prints on paper, accessioned 53.261.

¹³ Dilys Blum, "Painting by the Yard: American Artist-Designed Textiles 1947-57," in *Disentangling Textiles*, ed. Mary Schoeser (England: Middlesex University, 2003).

they were marketed and sold at moderate prices. Blum traces the relationship between the art market, consumer awareness, lack of purchasable commodities and disposable income as reasons for these prints. Also awareness of artists through exhibitions in galleries and department stores attracted a public starved for something new and visually stimulating after the restrictions and rationing of the war years.

Several companies who brought out artist-designed fabrics for the moderate market included the Onondaga Silk Company with their line of "Contemporary American Artists Prints" in affiliation with the Midtown Gallery in 1947.¹⁴ M. Lowenstein & Sons with their "Signature Fabrics Series" in 1952-1955,¹⁵ and Fuller Fabrics in 1955 with a collection of "Modern Master Prints," used the work of well-known artists---Picasso, Leger, Miro, Chagall and Dufy.¹⁶

Simpson's own contribution was a line 5 hand screen prints on rayon, designed by Salvador Dali. Identified as "Wesley Simpson's Artist Series," under the surrealist banner, they were: "Dessert Rocks," "Broken Coins," "Lightening Dots," "Flower Ballet," and "Trees," and several scarves.¹⁷ A great self-promoter, Dali also produced textile designs for men's neckties, furnishing fabrics for Schiffer Prints "Stimulus Fabric Series," illustrations for magazine covers and ads for Elsa Schiaparelli's perfume *Shocking*.

An ad in the *Kansas City Star* of April 13, 1947 for "Wesley Simpson's Artist Series," linked to a *Vogue* dress pattern. The fabrics sold at Peck's department store. The ads were probably the work of Dali as well. Their surrealist perspective and appropriation of imagery associated with his work distinguished them as a means of gaining the attention of a predominantly conservative audience and Simpson was clever in using these ads as a way of selling his fabrics. Ads for the Artist Series appeared in newspapers throughout the country during 1947 and many were linked with *Vogue* and *McCall's* dress patterns for only \$2.98 a yard. Adrian used the same fabrics in two elegant evening dresses photographed for *Vogue*, April 1, 1947 in ads that credit Wesley Simpson Custom Fabrics, Inc.

During the war, the United States had been a haven for many artists escaping Hitler. Many needed to find work and employing their talents for designing textile patterns was one lucrative way.

Marcel Vertès was one of the first and probably the most prolific of the artists working for Simpson. As a freelance designer, he produced over 60 patterns between 1943 and 1948. Hungarian by birth, Vertès first moved to Paris to paint, traveling to the United States twice during the 1930s, before settling in this country in 1939 for the duration of

¹⁴ "Paintings into Prints," *Vogue*, 1January 1947, 124-125, 142. The rayon prints sold for \$4 yard.

¹⁵ "M. Lowenstein & Sons Application of the Fine Arts in Apparel Fabrics," *American Fabrics*, Summer 1952, 93-94. The cotton prints sold for \$1.29 yard.

¹⁶ "Great Art and Fashion Fabrics: The Saga of Dan Fuller and Five Modern Masters," *American Fabrics*, Fall-Winter 1955-56, 52-55.

¹⁷ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Costume Institute, LY50.86.1-4.

the war.¹⁸ A prolific illustrator, muralist, painter, and writer, his work was characterized by its whimsical, sophisticated, humorous and slightly risqué nature as well as for his sinuous line and fluid brushstroke.

A second artist who created designs for Simpson was Ludwig Bemelmans. The author and illustrator of the popular children's book *Madeline*, whose work appeared in fashion magazines, including *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*, created two or three designs for Simpson. In an ad for a line of what were identified as "Museum Prints" inspired by objects in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and exhibited at the museum in 1945, as a way of encouraging the industry and the public.¹⁹

Simpson also purchased the work of textile designers Peter Todd Mitchell and Leslie and Jim Tillett. One example of Mitchell's scarves, had a design with a basket of flowers is also signed by him.²⁰ And an ad from 1948 shows two more.²¹

The Brooklyn Museum of Art's records listed textile designs by Hermanos Tillett. This was a reference to Leslie Tillett and his brother Jim, who in the 1940s started a textile printing studio in Mexico.²² A 1944-1945 sample book in the Costume Institute identifies 8 textile designs by Tillett. Bright in their use of color with bold graphic designs of jungle animals, birds, and abstract faces.

In closing I would just like to say that this can only be a brief look at Wesley Simpson and Wesley Simpson Custom Fabrics. What remains to be discovered, if they still exist are the business records that would allow us to analyze the financial worth of the company, through the volume of sales and revenues accrued. It is also still a mystery as to why he closed his business when he did. Was he a successful entrepreneur? I would say yes, from the point of evaluating the aesthetic quality of the textiles produced under his label. He had an eye for selecting good designs and artists--especially in the work of Marcel Vertès. And he was savvy in recognizing the importance of advertising as a means of selling his product behind the image and the motto of "The Doorway to Fashion." He was also a collector of fine art and folk art, and loved to travel the world with his wife, Adele.

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¹⁸ "Marcel Vertès, Painter, 66, Dies," *New York Times*, 1 November 1961.

¹⁹ Advertisement, *Vogue*, 1 December 1945, 68. Advertisement, *Vogue*, 1 April 1945.

²⁰ MFIT X365. 7A-C.

²¹ Advertisement, *Mademoiselle*, December 1948.

²² Doris Tillett, interview by author, 2 August 2002, New York, The Museum at FIT, New York.