2016

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Importing Irish Linen and Creating American ‘Art Moderne’: An Analysis of an Early 20th Century Trade Catalog

Lacy Simkowitz, Cotsen Foundation for Academic Research

During the late 1920s, a collaborative effort was launched by designers and manufacturers in the United States to develop indigenous modern decorative arts and unite art with industry. They were motivated by the realization that Europe surpassed U.S. in the production of contemporary furnishings—a fact made evident at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in 1925, an event that the U.S. tellingly declined to participate in because it believed it could not meet the requirement of presenting new and original designs.1 The exhibition, a selection of which toured the US in 1926, became a model for the display and marketing of modern design and the stylistic trends seen in the exhibition, as well as those recently introduced by emigres from Western and Central Europe, came to inform American decorative arts.2 “Art Deco,” the phrase now used to describe the various progressive styles that emerged during this period, materialized in all facets of the applied arts, including textiles, and the industry adopted—and adapted—the fashions of their European counterparts to suit the American marketplace.

A trade catalog of hand-printed linen that was produced by the New York textile importer Robert McBratney & Company, Inc.3 provides a window into this moment and illustrates the adoption and dissemination of Art Deco in the U.S. textile industry. The catalog, which resides in Lloyd Cotsen’s Textile Traces Study Collection in Los Angeles, is, like its maker, poorly documented and this paper serves as an effort to document both. Through an analysis of the catalog and a discussion of Robert McBratney & Co., its affiliations with key designers from the period, and its presence in several important exhibitions in the 1920s and 1930s, this paper situates both catalog and company within the history of American textiles and considers the function of the catalog not only as a tool to promote and sell McBratney’s linen, but to promote a philosophy that shaped American design.

Robert McBratney & Company
While less familiar today than some of its contemporaries—Cheney Brothers, Stehli Silks, and F. Schumacher and Co., for instance—Robert McBratney & Co. was a significant importer of Irish linen in the early decades of the 20th century. The founder of the company, Robert McBratney, was born in Belfast, Ireland and came to the US in 1884 as a representative of the York Street Flax Spinning Company, Belfast’s largest manufacturer of linen in the 19th century.4 It was an established practice at that time for Irish linen companies to send representatives back and forth to the U.S. to sell fabric and McBratney, according to his obituary, “crossed the Atlantic more than 100 times.”5 McBratney worked for York Street for eleven years before establishing his

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2Karen Davies, At Home in Manhattan: Modern Decorative Arts, 1925 to the Depression (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1983), 84.
3 For the purposes of this paper, I will hereafter refer to the company as Robert McBratney &Co.
5 Ibid., 16.
own wholesale import company in 1895, which he operated out of a storefront at 121 Franklin Street in lower Manhattan. In his obituary, McBratney is referred to as “the dean of the linen import trade” and in industry market reports from the period he is often quoted as the industry’s expert for linen and is in the company of well-known manufactures Cheney Brothers (representing silk) and Hunter Manufacturing and Commission Company (representing cotton). Upon his retirement in 1943, McBratney’s nephew, Robert Jr., assumed the role of company president. While no exact end date for the company has been established, references to it disappear around 1960.6

The McBratney Trade Catalog
The trade catalog (Fig.1) in the Cotsen collection measures 10 ¾” x 9” and is roughly ¾” thick. Its green paperboard cover, crumpled and creased with age, is embossed with gold lettering. A seal in the upper right corner of the cover—a harp with a pillar of a female figure enclosed by a royal crown—is reminiscent of the heraldic badge of Ireland and one can assume represents McBratney’s position as an American importer of Irish linen.

Linen import companies often incorporated symbols of Ireland (shamrocks, Celtic crosses, etc.) into their logos as a way to highlight the esteemed lineage of their product and to assure consumers of their superior quality.7 In the lower left corner of the cover are the words “Presented to” and next to it, in scrawled handwriting, is written a name that is somewhat hard to decipher: “C. R. Clifford,” presumably Chandler Robbins Clifford, the author of numerous decorative arts and interior furnishings texts from the early 20th century, and a publisher of magazines for the upholstery trade. Clifford was the founder of the American Association of

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6 This end date was kindly shared by John Stuart Gordon, Benjamin Attmore Hewitt Associate Curator of American Decorative Arts, Yale University Art Gallery, via email correspondence on July 8, 2016.
7 Kathleen Curtis Wilson, Irish People, Irish Linen (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 233. Harris argues that linen manufacturers recognized the market value of their product’s Irish origin “displaying it at every opportunity.”
Interior Decorators and lobbied for artists’ registration protections as the chairman of the Design Registration League before his death in 1935.\(^8\) It is likely that the Cotsen catalog was presented to Clifford by a McBratney salesman for consideration in an article or review in one of Clifford’s journals.

Opening the catalog, the reader is presented with a flowery-written Foreword—a three-page marketing pitch that introduces the reader to McBratney’s latest line of “art moderne” linen. An overview of the distinctive role linen has played throughout time and its ability to maintain color is used as one of several arguments for its appropriateness for use as a furnishing fabric. The writer references the presence of linen in museums, a reference that connotes sophistication and helps situate the catalog in its historical moment—a time in which museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York played an important role in elevating the applied arts by hosting exhibitions of art and industry.

Next the “artist” is celebrated as an important cultural visionary who is responsible for recording the spirit of his time. This was a widely used marketing tactic as artist-designed textiles, such as those by Raoul Dufy and Sonia Delaunay, earned considerable attention abroad and avant-garde art movements, like Cubism and Futurism, increasingly influenced the applied arts.\(^9\) The Foreword attributes an unnamed Austrian émigré to one of the designs, entitled *Shafts of Light* (Fig. 2) and, with its repeat of geometric, prism-like forms, is the most modern of the book’s patterns.

![Figure 2. Design for furnishing fabric, Robert McBratney & Co. Inc., 1920-1935. Paper, 9 ½” H x 7” W. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection, T-0616. Photo by Bruce M. White © Lloyd E. Cotsen, 2017.](image)

Geometric patterning, chevrons and the “zig-zag”, were popular tropes used to symbolize the dynamism of the modern world. The reference to an Austrian is apropos as emigré designers,

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primarily from Germany and Austria, were instrumental in bringing European design ideas and styles to the United States.\(^\text{10}\)

The discussion in the Foreword then turns to “Today” and to the tendency for new art forms to emerge out of radical political and societal changes. “No experience,” the Foreword states, “in all history has done more to affect Art than the recent World War”, which has found its expression in “Art Moderne”—the term that defines McBratney’s latest collection.

French decorative arts that embodied the new, modern spirit were often called “Art Moderne” and American products began to adopt the term soon after the 1925 Paris exhibition. “Art Moderne,” along with the terms “modern” and “modernistic,” were synonymous during the period and used to denote contemporary styles that broke with tradition.\(^\text{11}\) These styles took on a variety of forms from the reinterpretation of late 18th century styles and use of luxurious materials to the strong vivid colors and angular forms borrowed from modern art, to a reflection of technology and celebration of the machine. In the realm of textiles, McBratney was one of several American manufacturers to launch a modern line. Cheney Brothers and F. Schumacher & Co. are other prime examples. F. Schumacher & Co. began importing modern fabrics as early as 1900 and by 1925 was exhibiting its own “Art Moderne” line in its New York showroom. Cheney Brothers took its cue from modern art in several lines including its “Vitraux Prints” line from 1926, which consisted of Cubist-inspired fabrics.

The Foreword is followed by 29 swatches of linen representing the six designs that make up McBratney’s new collection. A drawing for each design introduces the swatches, which are presented in three or more different colorways. The textiles are indicative of the colorful, loosely drawn designs from the period and the popularity of meandering stems and outlined forms (Fig.3). Their simplicity and the floral subject matter call to mind the printed textiles of the Atelier Martine in Paris, and the vibrant colors pay homage to the palettes of the Ballet Russes and the Wiener Werkstatte. The patterns seen in McBratney’s samples in particular call to mind the flat, abstracted motifs and stylized clusters of foliage characteristic of the Viennese firm.

Other motifs include Asian-inspired “exotic” scenes, and classical architectural forms. Asian motifs were commonly appropriated in Art Deco textiles and were popular sources in F. Schumacher & Co.’s Modern lines as well.\(^\text{12}\) Another design in the McBratney catalog entitled “Tudor” reflects the popularity of revival styles in interior furnishings and consists of a motif of an oak leaf enclosed in a rectangle and free-flowing floral designs entwined with geometrical shapes suggestive of architectural molding. The last design in the book, “Chaucer’s Garden,” is similarly removed from the modern and depicts a garden of flora and fauna.


While it may seem surprising that these designs would be included in a so-called “moderne” line, they are indicative of how textile manufacturers typically embraced the modern, as a watered-down interpretation of progressive European styles and often as a supplement to a firm’s traditional products. The words “modern” or “moderne” were in fact sometimes merely a marketing tool used to reap attention, when in actuality the product was conservative. Along with traditional designs, these tepidly modern patterns proved to be most popular to consumers as they better suited the revival styles—colonial, Federal, English Tudor, for instance—that remained popular well into the 1930s.

The McBratney catalog in the Cotsen Collection curiously does not include a date. The cover’s reference to C.R. Clifford, who died in 1935, provides one clue, and the content of the Foreword and the swatches help place it somewhere between the late 1920s to mid-1930s. A 1927 New York Times article by Walter Rendell Storey describes a line of hand printed linen that sounds quite similar to those in the Cotsen catalog. Entitled “Home Draperies in the New American Manner: Our Designers Are Now Competing with those of the Old World,” the article describes a line of printed linens for window hangings and upholstery that “are vigorously competing with French productions.” With a “brilliance of color,” Storey states, “the linens feature new interpretations of floral patterns, geometrically carved Tudor ceilings, leaves of American trees, and, designs inspired by Chaucer’s garden.” The article highlights a design composed of three tones of one color printed in a “modernistic wave border, which merge into one another by delicate gradation.” Apple green, lavender, and orange-yellow are some of the colors mentioned

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16 Ibid., SM18.
as being used and are parallel to the colors featured in the aforementioned *Shafts of Light* design in the Cotsen catalog.

The *New York Times* article does not name the manufacturer, but given that it so closely describes the designs in the catalog in both content and color, it certainly is plausible that the product described is McBratney’s Hand Printed Linen and the realized fabrics from the swatches in the Cotsen catalog. Even if it is not, the article illustrates how indicative it is of printed textiles from the period and the efforts made then to promote American design.

**McBratney’s Place in Design History**

During this period, an important vehicle for introducing modern styles to the public and generating a market for them was exhibitions.\(^{17}\) Beginning in the late 1920s, a series of exhibitions were held at museums and department stores in New York that strove to do this by showcasing contemporary applied arts. The exhibitions displayed products in both traditional and modern styles and many textile manufacturers participated in them. These exhibitions played a significant role in exposing the public to modern styles and, as argued by historian Marilyn F. Friedman, “gave commercial credibility to the modern movement.”\(^{18}\) They were also tremendously popular; Macy’s 1928 “International Exposition of Art in Industry,” for example, attracted 250,000 visitors over the course of two weeks.\(^{19}\)

Robert McBratney & Co. participated in several important exhibitions of industrial arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum. In 1929, the Met held its first exhibition of modern American design, *The Architect and the Industrial Arts: An Exhibition of Contemporary American Design*, which featured thirteen ensemble rooms designed by prominent architects of the day. One hundred and fifty manufacturers participated and provided items for the rooms that were either already in production, or were designed specifically for the exhibition. McBratney supplied the window draperies for Ralph T. Walker’s “Man’s Study for a Country House” as well as the textiles for a “Children’s nursery and bedroom” designed by Eugene Schoen.\(^{20}\) Schoen was an American architect and designer who had attended the 1925 Paris exhibition and whose work was often associated with the French “moderne.”\(^{21}\) The textiles in the children’s room were designed by Marianne von Allesch, a German émigré most famous for her modern lamps and painted glass vases and sculptures. Samples of both of these textiles are in the Met’s collection.\(^{22}\)

The drapes in Walker’s “Man’s Study for a Country House” are attributed in the exhibition catalogue for *The Architect and the Industrial Arts* to an Austrian artist named Oskar Hauenstein for whom there exists scant information. Because of the stylistic similarities between the drapes and the samples in the Cotsen McBratney catalog, it is possible that Hauenstein is the émigré

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\(^{17}\) See Kaplan, *Art Deco 1910-1939*, 335-343.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 77.


\(^{22}\) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Modern and Contemporary Art Department, 29.81.1-6.
mentioned in the Foreword to the catalog. The only known reference to Hauenstein besides the
citation in the exhibition catalog is a 2011 Sotheby auction catalog of children’s illustrations,
where he is presented under the pseudonym “Rick van Ray” and is credited for an illustration of
Little Bo Peep.23 The Met’s textile from “Man’s Study for a Country House” is depicted in the
April 1929 issue of The Decorative Furnisher in a spread highlighting the season’s latest
furnishing fabrics, where it is presented next to another abstracted floral design by the
manufacturer La France Textile Industries described as a modified “Art Moderne damask.”24

McBratney also produced textiles for the 1931 Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 12th Exhibition of
Contemporary American Industrial Art that were designed by Kem Weber, Decarts Studios, and
Pola Hoffmann. A photograph illustrating the textiles appeared in the November 1931 issue of
The Decorative Furnisher and accompanies an article in which they are described as “unusual.”25
Hungarian-born Pola Hoffmann, later re-named Pola Stout, designed textiles for the Wiener
Werkstatte before she immigrated to the US with her first husband Wolfgang, the son of Joseph
Hoffmann. Kem Weber, another German émigré, was an important player in the development of
American modernism and the streamlined style.

McBratney fabrics were featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 1934 Contemporary
American Industrial Art exhibition and in the American Union of Decorative Artists and
Craftsmen (AUDAC) exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1931. The AUDAC, founded in
1928, was a short-lived but significant organization of designers, architects, and artists who
worked in modern styles and were committed to elevating the standards of design and supporting
like-minded industry professionals. The organization held two exhibitions and published the
book Annual of American Design before disbanding around 1931.26 All of the designers
previously mentioned, with the exception of Hauenstein, were members of the AUDAC, as were
others who also designed textiles produced by McBratney such as Ruth Reeves, Donald Deskey,
and Dorthoy Trout.27

The 1931 exhibition at Brooklyn displayed room ensembles filled with recent products suitable
for mass production. Kem Weber contributed an interior for a modern bungalow.28 A chair
included in his display, as well as a sofa, were upholstered in Phototone-printed linen that was
produced by a company in Greenville, South Carolina and distributed by McBratney. Wolfgang
and Pola Hoffmann used the fabrics for a series of office furniture that was also included in the
exhibition.29

23 Original Illustration Art from the Collections of Kendra and Allan Daniel, (New York: Sotheby’s April 11, 2011),
Lot 0392.
24 “Some of the Seasons New Drapery and Upholstery Fabrics,” The Decorative Furnisher, April 1929, 87.
25 “Some of the ‘Highlights’ at the Metropolitan Museum’s Twelfth Exhibition of Contemporary American
Industrial Art,” The Decorative Furnisher, November 1931, 36-37.
26 American Union of Decorative Artists and Craftsman, Annual of American Design 1931 (New York: I. Washburn,
1930).
27 Examples can be found in the collections of the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Yale University Art
28 “The AUDAC Exhibition,” The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly 8, no. 3 (July 1931), 94-95.
Despite being little-documented in the annals of textile and design history, Robert McBratney & Co. was a significant manufacturer of modern textiles and, through its participation in these key exhibitions and employment of innovative designers, played a role in the development of American modern design. McBratney represents an importer of Irish linen marketing an American product and an American textile manufacturer engaged with the promotion of native design informed by imported trends. This analysis of the trade catalog in the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection provides insight into this forgotten company and highlights the catalog’s function as a signifier of the time in which it was made.

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