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ILONKA KARASZ: MAKING MODERN

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Born in Hungary and “discovered” in New York’s Greenwich Village, Ilonka Karasz (1896-1981) brought a unique and remarkable talent to early American modern textile design. Though little known today, her contemporaries described her as “one of the best designers of modern textiles,” and noted the “widespread influence among textile manufacturers” of her modern textile designs.¹ Her exploration of textile design from 1915 to 1935 contributed to an exciting time in the history of American textiles—when American manufacturers used American designs, experimented with new uses for textiles, and developed new textile materials. Karasz’s textile designs from the 1910s reveal her artistic influences and illustrate her role as both a designer and an artist. Her work from the late 1920s and early 1930s indicates her innovativeness and renown. Karasz’s textiles from both periods reflect her devotion to modern design.

Before moving to America in 1913, Karasz studied at the Royal School of Arts and Crafts in Budapest, where she was one of the first females admitted.² Since Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire when she studied in Budapest, modern Viennese design influenced Karasz. Her early work reflected the folk-inspired stylized floral motifs and modern geometric patterns of the Wiener Werkstätte. Examples of Karasz’s first textile designs in America appeared in an avant-garde Greenwich Village publication called the *Modern Art Collector*, or *M.A.C.*, published from September 1915 to May 1918. Her contributions to the *M.A.C.* fulfilled the journal’s goal of enabling America “to keep in touch with modern artistic European tendencies at a date when traveling to Europe [was] freighted with difficulties, and thereby [encouraging] the development of the Modern Movement in this country.”³

The *M.A.C.*’s inaugural issue presented a four page section of wallpaper and textile designs by Karasz and the German-born artist and designer Winold Reiss. Unfortunately, the designs in this section were not designated by artist. However, three of the textile designs were reproduced the following year, 1916, in the *American Silk Journal* and attributed to Karasz—indicating that her designs received attention outside of Greenwich Village. (Figure 1.)

The second *M.A.C.* issue, October 1915, presented a four page section of designs by Karasz for dress goods. Of the four designs, two (a simple geometric pattern and a stripe and floral combination) were described as “a step aside from the ordinary, without being a radical change,” while the other two (large stylized floral border prints) were considered “more extreme.”⁴ Karasz illustrated the second two as flat designs and as they would appear incorporated into the hems of fashionable young women’s skirts. These two border designs reflected both the Wiener Werkstätte and one of Karasz’s life long inspirations—nature.

Several of Karasz’s other artistic influences and inspirations are revealed by her submissions to a significant series of textile design contests sponsored in part by the daily trade publication *Women’s Wear*, and held annually between 1916 and 1921. Karasz won prizes in the first three *Women’s Wear* textile design contests. The series was championed by M.D.C. Crawford, design editor for *Women’s Wear* and Research

Associate in Textiles for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The contests helped to promote his “Designed in America” campaign, which encouraged American industries to employ American designers who looked to historical American arts for inspiration.⁵ In addition to historical designs of the Americas (both North and South), Crawford also advocated European folk arts as fertile sources of inspiration.⁶

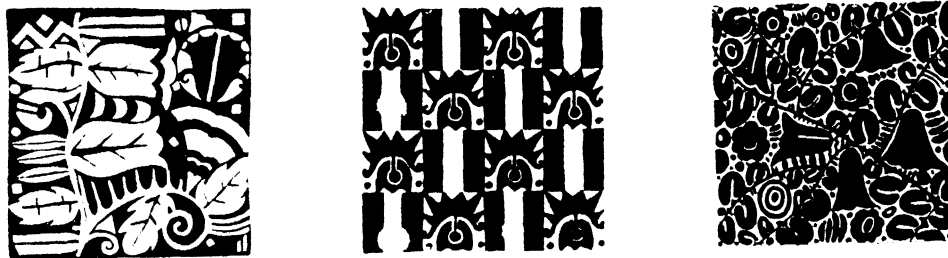


Figure 1. Three Textile Designs by Ilonka Karasz, 1915. [“New York’s Own Bohemia Centers in Old Greenwich Village,” *American Silk Journal* (October 1916), 53.]

In April 1917, Crawford published an article in the *American Museum Journal* which discussed the importance of museum collections as sources of design inspiration. He included an image of a vivid print with stylized birds and abstract shapes “inspired by Guatemala belts and girdles in the American Museum,” designed by Karasz and manufactured by the silk company H.R. Mallinson.⁷ Though not specifically labeled as a contest winner, several factors suggest that this was Karasz’s winning design from the first *Women’s Wear* contest (in which she won an Honorable Mention prize): it was illustrated with designs which were noted as winners, it met the contest’s requirement of being based on museum objects, and it was manufactured by a company which was interested in the *Women’s Wear* contests.⁸ That this piece was based on museum artifacts reveals another influence on Karasz’s designs—ethnographic objects. Karasz’s interest in ethnographic objects is further illustrated by a 1928 photograph of her home which shows an Indian elephant cloth on the wall of her living room.⁹

In the second *Women’s Wear* contest, in October 1917, Karasz won one of eleven fourth-place prizes, and her winning design again was produced as a print by Mallinson. Other contest winners included artists and textile designers Martha Ryther, Konrad Cramer (another contributor to the *M.A.C.*), and Marguerite and William Zorach. Crawford noted that the repetition of certain names from the first contest, such as Karasz, Ryther, and Cramer, proved that their work continued to interest the industry and that they had been “encouraged to devote their talents to creative work in artistic fabrics.”¹⁰

Karasz’s winning textile, a floral batik design described as a “modern dress silk pattern, inspired by European peasant art,” suggests another important element in her work.¹¹ (Figure 2.) The influence of European peasant art was indirectly evident in Karasz’s contributions to the *M.A.C.* Those designs were indebted to an aspect of the modern style of the Wiener Werkstätte inspired by traditional folk arts. Karasz’s interest in peasant designs, like her interest in ethnographic objects, is also revealed by a 1928 photograph of her home, which shows a corner cupboard displaying a collection of plates with peasant motifs.¹²

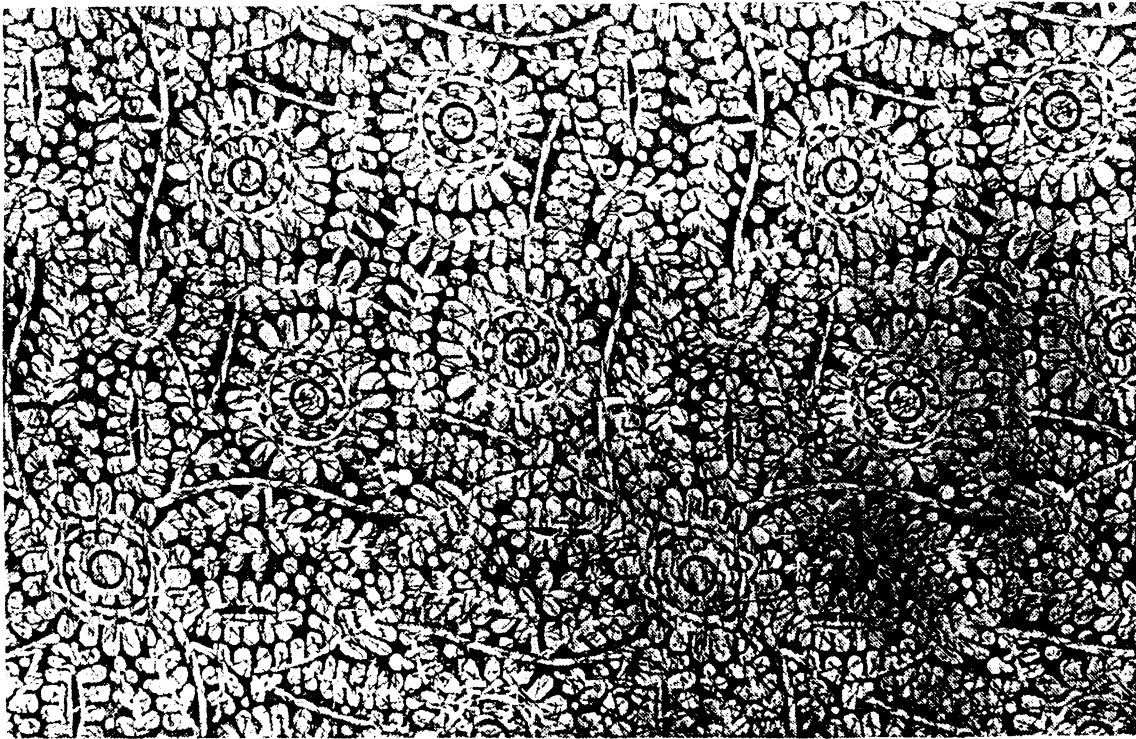


Figure 2. Floral Batik Pattern, designed by Ilonka Karasz, 1916, manufactured by H.R. Mallinson. Reprinted by permission from HOUSE BEAUTIFUL, copyright January 1919. The Hearst Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

Karasz's floral batik design received extensive exposure. In February of 1918, B. Altman, a prominent New York department store, displayed Karasz's design and four others from the second contest (all manufactured as prints by Mallinson) in its Fifth Avenue window.¹³ Later in 1918, Mallinson used Karasz's design, printed on Indestructible Voile (a Mallinson trade name for a chiffon-like fabric), in dresses created to promote its Spring Collection.¹⁴ These were illustrated in the *American Silk Journal* in March 1918. Karasz's floral batik pattern was especially important to Mallinson because it allowed the company to capitalize on the popularity of batiks in the late 1910s.

House Beautiful, in a January 1919 article by M.D.C. Crawford, also illustrated Karasz's winning design from the second *Women's Wear* contest. Crawford explained that he included it because it was "a very beautiful and successful design . . . an excellent example of how well the machine [could] imitate certain forms of handwork . . . [and] the work of an artist of distinction in other lines of endeavor."¹⁵ He acknowledged that the design was not typical of dress fabrics, but stated that its success demonstrated a public readiness for change. He explained that the original, Karasz's submission to the contest, was created through the batik process, while the Mallinson print was done with engraved cylinders.¹⁶

In December 1917, Crawford published an article in *Women's Wear* with drawings of two dresses created from batiks by Karasz, whom he described as having "an enviable reputation . . . as a fabric designer."¹⁷ The first fabric, with a soft geometric design, was influenced by the South Sea Islands, Fiji in particular. Crawford felt that this textile represented both "artistic work" and the use of "museum documents."¹⁸ The second fabric was loosely influenced by Russian design. Crawford suggested that it was

“more expressive of the creative ideas of the artist than of any special historical type.”¹⁹ He stated that designs such as these were important as indications of the direction in which the textile industry should proceed. He emphasized the importance of artists being able to express themselves through diverse media—a quality which he felt would heighten the freshness and measure of talent in their ideas. Karasz, who also excelled in graphic design in the 1910s, exemplified his ideal of the versatile designer.

Crawford’s support and Mallinson’s promotion of Karasz’s designs were important factors in the early establishment of her reputation. In numerous periodicals, Crawford praised her success and used her career and creations to illustrate his ideas regarding modern textile design issues. As a major high-quality silk manufacturer, Mallinson not only made Karasz’s designs widely available, but also indicated to the public that they were the height of fashion. Mallinson’s repeated production of Karasz’s designs informed other manufacturers that she possessed a talent for creating designs suitable to machine production—a quality stressed in the *Women’s Wear* contests.

In the third *Women’s Wear* contest, in October 1918, Karasz won one of ten fourth-place prizes. Other contest winners included Winold Reiss, Martha Ryther, Marguerite Zorach, noted textile designer Ruth Reeves, and fashion designer Mariska Karasz (Ilonka’s sister). In April 1919, *House Beautiful* illustrated Karasz’s prize-winning design, an energetic composition of medieval knights and horses. Possibly when designing this textile, Karasz looked to the famous Bayeux Tapestry (France, c. 1070–1080) for inspiration.²⁰ Karasz’s interest in collecting old textiles suggests that historical textiles were another influence and interest that extended beyond the *Women’s Wear* contests.²¹

Karasz participated in a second series of contests which focused on hand craftsmanship. These contests, the Albert Blum Hand-Decorated Fabrics Competitions (begun by Albert Blum, treasurer of United Piece Dye Works and a frequent judge in the *Women’s Wear* contests), occurred annually from 1917 to 1922. In the second Albert Blum contest, held at the Art Alliance of America in New York in January 1918, Karasz won a special prize for a black and white batik. In March 1918, the *American Silk Journal* illustrated a “lacelike black-and-white batik” by Karasz which was “awarded a special prize at the Art Alliance Exhibition.”²² The date and description suggest that this was Karasz’s winning work from the second Albert Blum contest. The design for this batik is related to a type of traditional Hungarian needlework, with which Karasz likely would have been familiar.²³

Karasz designed textiles apart from the *Women’s Wear* and Albert Blum contests. In 1919, she, Winold Reiss, and Konrad Cramer exhibited batiks at the Academy Art Shop. Two of Karasz’s batiks, *The King* and *The Queen*, both wall hangings with large central enthroned figures, illustrated a December 1919 article on the exhibition. This article noted that *The King* was worked in “the famous and priceless dragons’-blood dye,” and described a work not illustrated as a “green and blue blending . . . [representing] a wide-eyed Buddha squatting at prayer, . . . fit to adorn the wall of a seeker after treasures.”²⁴ The article played upon the romantic aspect of Karasz’s Hungarian background, stating, “Her batiks reflect her gipsy [sic] sympathies. She dreams what she wishes to create and creates without fear what she has dreamed.”²⁵ Unlike her contributions to the first three *Women’s Wear* contests, these batiks were not

conceived for machine production, and placed Karasz firmly in the role of artist rather than designer.

In the mid to late 1910s, Karasz worked as a textile design teacher at the Modern Art School, a progressive school founded in Greenwich Village in late 1915.²⁶ This position provided Karasz with another opportunity to spread the modern aesthetic, encourage modern textile design in America, and establish important contacts within the New York art world. Other teachers at the Modern Art School included Marguerite and William Zorach, and Martha Ryther (who began her career there as a student).

Around 1920, Karasz married Wilhelm Nyland, a Dutch chemist who came to the United States as a young man. This event may explain why Karasz's name ceased to appear in conjunction with the *Women's Wear* contests past 1919. Shortly after their marriage, the couple bought land in Brewster, New York, about one and a half hours north of New York City by train, though they always maintained quarters in New York City as well.²⁷ Also, sometime before 1935, probably in the mid 1920s, Karasz and her husband lived for several years in Java and Europe.²⁸ After 1920 it was not until about 1928 that Karasz reappeared on the American textile scene. With her reputation as a modern textile designer firmly established by the late 1920s, Karasz demonstrated her versatility and innovativeness by pushing modern design into new areas of the textile industry.

In 1928, Karasz created two room installations, featuring several of her modern textile designs, for the first American Designers' Gallery exhibition. The American Designers' Gallery was a group of fifteen designers—including Winold Reiss, Martha Ryther, Ruth Reeves, Wolfgang Hoffmann (son of the famous Austrian designer, Josef Hoffmann), and Donald Deskey—which promoted modern design and explored decorative uses for new materials. The group ended in 1929 after its second show because of the economic crisis surrounding the stock market crash.

Karasz's first room for the 1928 American Designers' Gallery exhibition was a nursery, one of the earliest modern nurseries in America. It was widely published and praised in a variety of periodicals. Featured in this nursery was a rug Karasz designed which she later used in her daughter's nursery. This rug, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is an example of a playground style rug—a type of rug Karasz frequently used in her nursery designs. Taking into consideration modern ideas of child psychology, she intended for the bright, basic colors and simple geometric shapes of these nursery rugs to create festive, educational playground atmospheres. In her daughter's nursery, Karasz surrounded this rug with blocks and furniture to create a barrier like a real playground.²⁹

The second room Karasz created for the 1928 American Designers' Gallery exhibition, a modern apartment room, incorporated two textiles designed by Karasz. The first, a rug with a rectilinear design which echoed the simple forms of Karasz's furniture, was executed by the New Age Workers, a group of craftsmen in Saluda, North Carolina.³⁰ The second textile was a door hanging with a large, woven tulip pattern.³¹

The tulip textile reappeared in *Creative Art* in 1931 as upholstery on a sofa in a living room designed by Donald Deskey.³² Similarly, Gilbert Rohde used a playground rug by Karasz in one of his nurseries.³³ Also, the noted designer and writer Paul Frankl illustrated Karasz's decorative creations in his important books on modern design. The

use of Karasz's works by her peers shows that they admired and respected her designs and emphasizes her significance as a designer of modern textiles.

Helen Sprackling, who wrote articles about textiles and other interior design issues for *House Beautiful* and *Parents' Magazine*, described the tulip textile, in "warm

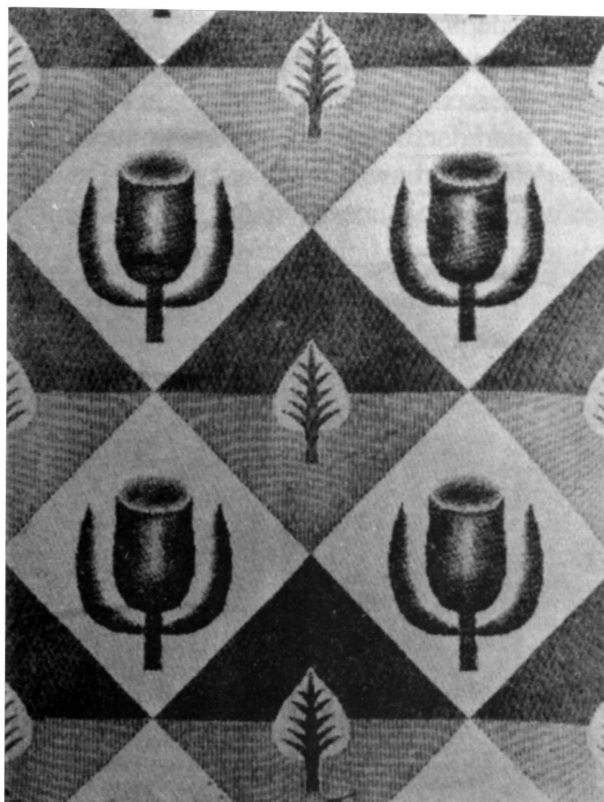


Figure 3. Tulip Textile by Ilonka Karasz, c. 1928.
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tones of tans and browns," as "one of the few available designs in a woven material of American production."³⁴

(Figure 3.) Sprackling went on to write that as far as she could discover, "Miss Karasz . . . [was] the only established contemporary artist . . . designing for woven materials."³⁵

She explained that few designers explored this field because of a lack of understanding of the Jacquard loom, which resulted in an inability to design patterns suitable to weaving. Louise Bonney, who wrote about textiles for the magazine *Good Furniture and Decoration*, noted, however, that both Karasz and Deskey studied the Jacquard loom and designed for several mills.³⁶

Regardless of whether Karasz was the first or one of the first few American designers to work with modern woven textiles, she definitely was credited by her contemporaries as a pioneer in this area.

One of Karasz's most widely publicized textile designs, *Oak Leaves* (c. 1928), was a lively pattern of geometric shapes and stylized natural forms. (Figure 4.) *Arts and Decoration* described the fabric, produced by Leshner-Whitman, as "tones of browns, vivid orange, green, blue, and black on golden glow mohair."³⁷ *Oak Leaves* employed a variety of weave structures to enhance its visual effect.³⁸ In 1930, Karasz stated, "My idea in design is to intensify texture by every element of the design so as to produce a richer looking fabric," indicating that she carefully planned the textural as well as the visual effects.³⁹

The *Oak Leaves* design appeared in Chicago's Marshall Field department store showroom illustrated in *Good Furniture Magazine* in November 1928. Marshall Field used the material as draperies in an "Art Moderne Boy's Room," assembled to promote modern furnishings and instruct customers on how to arrange them. The article noted the success of this room for a college boy, stating that it sold several times in its entirety.⁴⁰ The popularity and success of this textile design are supported further by its use, again as draperies, in a Chicago apartment featured in *Good Furniture and Decoration* in October

1929. These draperies were described as “smart, imported mohair.”⁴¹ That this American design mistakenly was labeled “imported” is a credit to its bold embodiment of the modern style.

In August 1929, La France Textile Industries ran an advertisement in *Good Furniture Magazine* presenting the same pattern, calling it “Art Moderne Moquette, pattern 3213.” This full page color advertisement depicted the textile, in orange, tan, and several shades of brown, as upholstery. *Oak Leaves* was illustrated and credited to Karasz several times before this advertisement appeared, clearly establishing her as the originator. That La France, a moderately priced manufacturer which produced textiles for the mass market, selected to copy Karasz’s design and use it in advertisements, further indicates the design’s wide appeal and commercial success.⁴²

In addition to experimenting with modern design in textiles, Karasz also experimented with new materials such as oilcloth. In 1929, Sprackling explained how oilcloths had been combined successfully with modern design: “About a year ago, Miss Karasz was asked to design a pattern for oilcloth that would reflect the modern spirit. At the moment it was considered merely an innovation in keeping with a possible fad. The fabric was put on the market, met with instantaneous success, and is becoming one of the established best sellers of the manufacturer’s line, which might seem to prove that the public instinctively, or otherwise, appreciates a good design when it finds it.”⁴³ The accompanying illustration featured a stylized floral oilcloth, designed by Karasz and produced by Standard Textile Company, used in a three part screen.



Figure 4. *Oak Leaves*, designed by Ilonka Karasz, c. 1928, manufactured by Leshner-Whitman.

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Karasz also worked with the new synthetic material rayon. Less expensive to produce than silk, rayon began to surpass silk’s success in the late 1920s. The Dupont-Rayon Company employed Karasz, Donald Deskey, and Ruth Reeves to experiment with weaving possibilities in rayon. Through these experiments, Dupont-Rayon hoped to “improve and vary” rayon’s texture and to raise the standards of rayon production in America.⁴⁴

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Karasz explored yet another aspect of modern textile design—fabrics for modern forms of transportation. In 1930, Bonney stated that Karasz designed a linen and rayon material for F. Schumacher and Company’s Airplane and Motor Division, a division with which Deskey also worked.⁴⁵ In 1929, *House Beautiful* illustrated an automobile interior upholstered with a subtly striped rayon and

linen Schumacher fabric by Karasz.⁴⁶ Also, a rayon and cotton material Karasz designed was used in a Fokker airplane around 1930.⁴⁷

The list of textile manufacturers with whom Karasz had worked by 1935 was impressive and extensive: Mallinson, Leshner-Whitman, Standard Textile Company, Dupont-Rayon, Schwarzenbach and Huber, Cheney Brothers, Susequehanna Silk Mills, Belding Brothers, Bigelow-Sanford, and Schumacher.⁴⁸ Karasz's association with these companies, all high-quality manufacturers, attests to her notable reputation within the textile industry. Karasz's ability to create textile designs that were both adaptable to mass manufacture and artistic earned her justified recognition. In 1929, Sprackling praised, "from printed mohair to the woven materials produced on intricate Jacquard looms, and back again to straightforward oilcloth, Miss Karasz is designing with a success that can be measured by both the practical terms of the manufacturer and the strict demands of good art."⁴⁹ Her numerous awards in the *Women's Wear* contests and subsequent commercial success confirm the outstanding quality of her designs.

In a career which lasted over six decades, Karasz excelled in many diverse areas of design—including textile, furniture, interior, wallpaper, ceramic, silver, and graphic. Despite the broad range of her successes, Karasz's innovative work with textile design from 1915 to 1935 remains an especially vibrant illustration of her amazing artistry and passion for modern design. Her textile designs reflected the richness of her artistic influences and interests: modern Viennese design, European peasant arts, ethnographic objects, historical works, and nature. Her achievements with textile design embodied the energy and daring present in American textile design in the early twentieth century. By the early 1930s Ilonka Karasz was a well-known modern textile designer—creating modern designs for modern materials for modern uses.

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