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## Light and Shadow: The Textile Designs of Edward Steichen

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## Light and Shadow: The Textile Designs of Edward Steichen

by  
Lola McKnight

In response to a request from Kneeland [Ruzzie] Green, who was both Art Director of Stehli Silk Corporation and a close personal friend, Steichen contributed a group of modernist photographic designs to Stehli's Americana Prints collection, a series of artist-designed textiles [1925-1927]. While several prominent graphic artists and national personalities contributed to this collection meant for use on silk dress fabric, the adaptations of Edward Steichen's silver gelatin prints received more attention from the Stehli company and from the contemporary press than any other single artist who designed Americana prints. These photographic images of weeds, carpet tacks, sugar cubes, thread and other ordinary objects appear, to date, to be the only textile designs by Steichen.

For Steichen, they represent his continuing interest in the use of light and of his increased use of studio-composed shots in his commercial artwork. As well, they continue his interest in aerial photography, a perspective of sharp and clear contrast developed in his work for the Navy during World War I. All designs are closely related to his continuing explorations of the effects of light and atmosphere.

For Stehli and the textile industry, these designs reflect the trend to systematically incorporate art and the artist into design, production and sales of American fashion, a trend well-established by the early 1920s and a part of the new industrial momentum in design. Stehli's use of Steichen and other artists working in the United States represents the interest in using American sources in fashion as a departure from the traditional European inspiration.

Lola McKnight received a B.S. degree in Technical Writing in Textiles from Carnegie Mellon University and earned an M.A. in the Museum Studies graduate program at the Fashion Institute of Technology where her major research was on artist-designed textiles. As well, she has a graduate degree in psychology from Illinois State University where she focused on the effects of dress and adornment on communication. After working as an editor for many years, she currently she lives and teaches writing in Illinois. Active in both local and national professional groups, she also maintains her own business in research and editing for clients working in the fields of museums, art, design, clothing, and education.