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**Jessie Franklin Turner:  
American Fashion and “Exotic” Textile Inspiration**

by  
Patricia E. Mears

Jessie Franklin Turner was an American couturier who played a prominent role in the emergence of the high-fashion industry in this country, from its genesis in New York during the First World War to the flowering of global influence exerted by Hollywood in the thirties and forties. The objective of this paper is not only to reveal the work of this forgotten designer, but also to research the traditional and ethnographic textiles that were important sources of inspiration in much of her work. Turner’s hallmark tea gowns, with their mix of “exotic” fabrics and flowing silhouettes, evolved with the help of a handful of forward-thinking manufacturers and retailers who, as early as 1914, wished to establish a unique American idiom in design. Morris De Camp Crawford, a specialist in ancient Peruvian textiles and later Design Editor of Women’s Wear spearheaded the promotion of this pro-American movement in the 1910s and twenties. Crawford proved to be a pivotal figure because he introduced textile designers and, later, fashion designers like Turner to unique sources of inspiration, including ethnic and non-Western garments and fabrics in the permanent collections of the Brooklyn Museum of Art<sup>1</sup> and the Museum of Natural History.

While it is difficult to assess the long-term influence of Crawford’s efforts on American textile design, they were invaluable to Turner, who established both an unparalleled reputation as this country’s first true couturier and a successful business that lasted until 1942. Created with fabrics inspired by museum pieces from the Islamic world, East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent Africa, the Americas, and Eastern Europe, Turner’s tea gowns and day clothes became popular with wealthy New Yorkers and were often featured in the editorial pages of Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, and Town & Country throughout the twenties and thirties. Access to museum collections made Turner’s designs very different from both her American and French contemporaries; they often preferred rococo and neoclassic sources, as well as contemporary, *art moderne* design elements. A small number of Turner creations still exists in museum collections, and a few of these will be analyzed in an effort to trace the original museum pieces that inspired them. In most cases, neither the original ethnographic textile nor the modern reinterpretation survives, so period illustrations and photographs must suffice.

### **Birth of A Designer**

Turner remains an enigmatic and elusive figure. So little factual information about her life and career survives that the only known published photograph of her

appeared in the December 1933 issue of Fortune magazine; where in it she sits amid three of her house mannequins, her bowed head turned in profile (figure 1). One of the few concrete sources of biographical information is a survey issued by the Brooklyn Museum of Art in the forties, which was completed by Turner in her own hand and which is now in the archives of the museum. According to the survey, Jessie Franklin Turner was born on December 10, 1881, to Richard Major Turner of Wheeling, West Virginia, and Louise Pullen Franklin of Plymouth, Massachusetts. According to Crawford, she was a native of the tidewater region of Virginia,<sup>2</sup> but Turner refers to St. Louis, Missouri, as the place of her birth. At some point she wed Charles Hiram Ferguson, and always used her married name in private life.

Turner's career seems to have begun with courses at a junior college in Peoria, Illinois, where she also found employment in the field of fashion as a clerk selling underwear at a local department store. Entrance to the world of design came "somewhat later," when Turner evolved from an underwear buyer for Scruggs, Vandervoort & Barney, a noted St. Louis store, into a designer who created "special garments" and broadened "out her field into negligees."<sup>3</sup> The inspiration of lingerie was, in fact, an important influence in Turner's later work. In the early years of the twentieth century, she gained employment as a designer at James McCutcheon & Company on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, New York City, a store that already had a reputation for producing and selling goods of unusual taste. In the early to mid 1910s, Turner moved to Bonwit Teller & Company and began to make what Crawford later termed the "kind of costumes on which her fame rests."<sup>4</sup> According to Turner herself, the store's founder, Paul Bonwit, was an unusual but brilliant man who was "temperamental, and, at times, difficult, but he had a gift of taste and a delight in unusual creations."<sup>5</sup> Somewhere in between, Turner obtained formal art training in sculpture under the tutelage of the French neo-classicist Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929).

### **Textiles and Inspiration**

It was during her years at Bonwit Teller, between 1916 and 1922, that Turner produced several garments with the best-documented fabric design of her career—the "Mughal Bird." Inspiration for this textile design was owing in large part to Paul Bonwit's relationship with the writer and textile enthusiast, Morris de Camp Crawford. Crawford's well-documented connections to museums and their curators, such as Stewart Culin of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, gave textile and clothing designers like Turner access to extraordinary materials from all over the world. It also provided designers with public venues—from design contests to museum exhibitions—for displaying their latest achievements. One of the most successful ventures was the "Exhibition of Industrial Arts in Costumes and Textiles" held at the Museum of Natural History from November 1 to December 1, 1919. The event was well publicized, and was accompanied by an article replete with photographs in the Natural History Journal.<sup>6</sup> Jessie Franklin Turner made several creations based on Turkish and Coptic sources for Bonwit Teller; it is interesting to note that these models are not unlike the designs by the renowned Venetian-based artist Marino Fortuny in their reliance on historic textiles and their rich, saturated colors.

The “Mughal Bird” pattern most closely resembles a stylized interpretation of a type of tame mynah bird prevalent in northern India, especially in Srinagar, where the birds are known as *hura*<sup>7</sup>. They were incorporated into the designs of textiles such as Kashmir shawls during the Mughal Empire, and continued to be used later, during the Afghan period.<sup>8</sup> The *hura* were often woven in a half drop repeat, and banded along the bases and tops of parallel rows of buti, or cone-shaped floral bouquets. Although a number of Kashmir shawls with the *hura* rendered on a saffron-colored ground exists, no records have yet been found to indicate that such textiles were in either the Museum of Natural History or the Brooklyn Museum collections as that time.

Two obvious questions arise: how did Turner have two distinctly different textiles made using the same motif and where did she get the inspiration? Clues to these questions can be found in the archives of the Brooklyn Museum of Art and in the writings of M.D.C. Crawford. Turner herself recalled designing a negligee inspired by a blouse in the Brooklyn Museum of Art’s collection “with an all-over bird pattern.” It can be inferred that Paul Bonwit permitted her to have specially made fabrics produced that cost \$30 dollars a yard, while the finished garment sold for over \$400, “an unheard-of-price, at the time.” According to Turner, Bonwit was “just as excited as I was when this costume was a success.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, it was so successful that a series of garments was made, even using chiffon in shades of black, red, and light blue, as the base fabric while retaining the white bird. Crawford reported that the bird was rendered with yellow eyes and black feet, but in reality it was the other way around: the eyes were black and the feet were yellow (figure 4).<sup>10</sup>

One version of the “Mughal Bird” dress was illustrated in Crawford’s book One World Fashion, and a photograph of the same dolman-sleeved, fur-trimmed tea gown appeared in the Natural History Journal. Both publications date the dress to 1920. While it is impossible to determine what type of fabric Turner used to make that particular tea gown, two other examples of tea gowns ornamented with the “Mughal Bird,” now in the permanent collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, clearly illustrate the diversity of both the textile types and the clothing styles employed by Turner in realizing a single theme. Around 1920-21, two clients--Mrs. M.D.C. Crawford (née Elizabeth Goan) and a Brooklyn resident and artist named Mary Boocock Leavitt--commissioned the garments. It is also worth noting that a third example of the “Mughal Bird” motif ornaments a tunic that belonged to Aline Bernstein, one of the co-founders of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and which is now in the collection of the Costume Institute.

The Leavitt tea gown (figure 2), long-sleeved and ankle-length, is made of bright orange silk crepe and ornamented with parallel rows of white birds that cover the sleeves, bodice, and top half of the skirt. It is embroidered using the cross-stitch technique. Crawford notes that craftsmen rendered the fabric in one of the largest embroidery factories in the city of New York,<sup>11</sup> but fails to name the firm. By contrast, the Goan teagown (figure 3) is sleeveless and made of a metallic and silk fabric brocaded with a

pattern that is identical to the orange tea gown in design and scale. Turner makes an indirect reference indicating that the source of the brocaded fabric was Delhi, India.<sup>12</sup>

While factual information about the production of the textiles can be traced, the location of the original textile that inspired Turner has proved to be more difficult. Nevertheless, although the exact textile used by Turner has yet to be located and verified, a number of precursors can be documented. For example, an illustration of a sleeveless Indian tunic ornamented with the same bird motif was published in Women's Wear on October 10, 1919, in a drawing rendered by the textile designer Ruth Reeves (figure 5). In a separate Women's Wear article by Crawford dated September 15, 1919, the author noted that there was a set of negligees on view in the Bonwit Teller windows that possessed the "spirit of Oriental loveliness" with a white bird motif "taken from an old Indian blouse in the Brooklyn Institute Museum." The visual evidence, coupled with Crawford's report, led to the recent discovery of a large cache of Indian textiles acquired during a museum expedition in 1914, still stored in the original travelling trunks. The original Indian blouse ornamented with birds might be located once access to the trunks becomes possible in the coming months.

It is not surprising that the contents of the travelling trunks remained undiscovered for so long when the scope and age of the Brooklyn Museum of Art's collection is taken into account. The museum has an estimated 1,500,000 to two million objects, over three hundred thousand of which are catalogued as textiles or clothing. It also has the oldest institutional costume and textile collection in the United States; the first recorded objects, a group of kimonos, entered the museum in 1903. In the early years, from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, an efficient, comprehensive, and systematic formula for cataloguing objects did not exist, and some pieces entering the collection were inconsistently numbered and identified.

### **Jesse Franklin Turner, Inc.**

Even after Turner left Bonwit Teller to work under her own name, she continued to have a fruitful relationship with both M.D.C. Crawford and the Brooklyn Museum's Curator of Ethnography, Stewart Culin. In a series of correspondences dating between 1919 and 1928, Culin related the praise of her work that he heard from friends and relatives, such as "I did not dream there was anything like them made in America," or "quite as fine as Callot's,"<sup>13</sup> in a letter dated March 23, 1922. Turner, in response, often thanked Culin for his role as a mentor noting that "the work which I have done through the inspiration received at the Brooklyn Museum with your kind and patient assistance has been very gratifying. The artistic value of our productions has been greatly enhanced, and has duly received comment and recognition."<sup>14</sup>

Turner's departure from Bonwit Teller to form her own firm was not a singular act. In fact, between 1919 and 1923, the designer attained a fluid status as a designer under three labels. Letters in the Brooklyn Museum's archives reveal that in the summer

of 1919, Turner produced work under the label: “Winifred Warren, Inc. (Jessie Franklin Turner).” On July 18, 1919, Crawford noted in Women’s Wear that “sometime this autumn Winifred Warren, creator of negligees and teagowns, will move from 11 West 56<sup>th</sup> Street to 6-8 East 12<sup>th</sup> Street,” and that Turner had taken a long lease with the intention of creating both a custom salon and a craft guild to train young artists and teachers. While she was designing under the “Winifred Warren” label, Turner’s work also appeared in the windows of Bonwit Teller in the fall of 1919. The last dated correspondence in the Brooklyn Museum’s archives with Turner’s signature under the “Winifred Warren” letterhead is from February 16, 1923. A year earlier, by March of 1922, Turner had moved her salon to 290 Park Avenue, and was corresponding under her own name from the new address. In less than a decade, Turner moved again, to occupy a space at 23 East 67<sup>th</sup> Street (next door to Elizabeth Hawes) and later, in 1936, she relocated to 410 Park Avenue, the address she maintained until she closed her doors in 1942.

Though she was no longer under the direction of Paul Bonwit, Turner continued to rely on opulent and exotic textiles as the source of her designs, a point noted in a May 1, 1922 Vogue editorial. In a series of Turner’s own advertisements that ran in the major American fashion publications from 1932 to 1940, it is clear that rich textiles, coupled with silhouettes inspired by primarily Asian dress and historic fashion, were the mainstay of her business. For example, the November 1936 issues of Harper’s Bazaar and Vogue ran quarter-page and half-page advertisements, respectively, picturing a bust-length photograph of a young woman in profile (figure 6) wearing, according to the caption, a “document gown inspired by a Polliuolo portrait . . . Titian Salome velvet with Russian antique medallion sleeves.” The larger version of the advertisement that ran in Vogue noted that Turner’s “special fabrics are woven to her own specifications” and “dyed by her own formula.”

While evidence exists to prove Turner’s control over the production of her woven and embroidered textiles, this advertisement was one of the few written sources referring to the creation of dyed fabrics. Turner not only dyed textiles using relatively modern motifs, but also explored designs from the distant past. A marvelous example of this can be seen in a cropped silk velvet tunic in the Brooklyn Museum’s collection, resist-dyed with three roundels akin to those woven and traded along the famed silk route from the sixth to the ninth centuries C.E. Two roundels adorn the front of the tunic, while a larger roundel is placed in the center of the back. The two roundels on the front appear to have a single bird in the center of each, possibly a duck—a popular motif in both Chinese and Sassanian woven silks. Each motif is placed within a readily identifiable circular band filled with evenly spaced balls or “pearls.” According to Professor Zhao Feng, “roundel patterns on silk consist of a main motif, usually a variety of animal, placed within a circular border.”<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the better-known roundel patterns that appear in both scholarly and general-reference textile publications, the largest of Turner’s roundels lacks a representational central figure or figures (figure 7). Instead, Turner opted to place four

representations of the same Chinese characters, 巾, (*jin*), meaning a piece of cloth that is used as a scarf, kerchief, or headwrap, on their sides, positioned at the four directional points—north, south, east, and west. The placement of the *jin* character is akin to the layout of the so-called, cosmological “TLV” bronze mirrors of the Han Dynasty, although the mirrors are far more complex and pregnant with meaning than the Turner roundels.<sup>16</sup> Professor Zhao Feng notes that countless patterns and structural techniques existed, including the use of Chinese characters (as opposed to creatures) and the use of both weaving and printing. Because the Turner garment was designed in about 1933, it is impossible to tell whether or not she relied on museum examples or objects in her private collection. Without a direct source, it is tempting to imagine that Turner made a personal statement about the universal role of textile and clothing design by choosing the Chinese character for “cloth” and placing it within a globe at the four directional points.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the most tantalizing clue to the source of Turner’s textile production is a large collection of at least forty-four wood blocks used for textile printing that entered the Brooklyn Museum of Art’s collection in 1942. Although there is no concrete documentation to verify their source, each of the blocks is labeled in ink with the initials “JFT” and might be, according to notation’s in the museums accession records, part of a “collection of stencil patterns and wood block patterns used by Jessie Franklin Turner on dress fabrics over a period of 20 years.” It is unlikely that they belong to a smaller collection of blocks that entered the Brooklyn Museum of Art’s collection in 1922, after an expedition by the institution’s Curator of Ethnography, Stewart Culin, for two reasons: first, the blocks are not numbered, and Culin was usually very diligent about numbering each acquisition he made; second, Culin writes on pages 173-76 of his 1922 expedition report that he purchased only a small number of wood blocks and stencils from several different sources, a few at a time.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, it is only appropriate that Turner, after retiring in 1942, would have donated the very elements of textile design and production back to the institution that had proved to be such a rich source of inspiration for her beautiful and unique American fashions.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the museum changed its name numerous times in its 175-year history, beginning with the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences in 1823. Later, in the early twentieth century, it became the Brooklyn Institute, and, after World War II, was renamed the Brooklyn Museum and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, respectively. These changes are reflected in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> M. D. C. Crawford, The Ways of Fashion (New York: Putnam’s, 1941), 231.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 232.

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- <sup>6</sup> Lauren Whitley, "Morris de Camp Crawford and American Textile Design, 1916-1921" (M.A. Thesis, State University of New York, Fashion Institute of Technology, 1994), 73-74.
- <sup>7</sup> The *hura*, or mynah bird, was amongst the most popular birds depicted in Indian textiles along with the parrot and peacock.
- <sup>8</sup> Frank Ames, The Kashmir Shawl and Its Indo-French Influence, 2d ed. (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: Antique Collectors' Club, 1988), 232-35.
- <sup>9</sup> M.D.C. Crawford, The Ways of Fashion, New York: 1941, 232.
- <sup>10</sup> M.D.C. Crawford, "Oriental Loveliness Reinstated in Modern Designs of Negligees and Underwear," Women's Wear, September 15, 1919.
- <sup>11</sup> M.D.C. Crawford, The Ways of Fashion, New York: 1941, 232.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> "Callot's" refers to one of the leading couture houses in Paris, which rose to prominence before World War I. Known officially as Callot Soeurs, or the "Callot Sisters," the house was noted for their exquisite evening dresses and tea gowns ornamented with lace and embroidery. They were lauded by the author Marcel Proust in Remembrance of Things Past.
- <sup>14</sup> Excerpt from a letter to Stewart Culin by Jessie Franklin Turner dated February 4, 1919, under the Bonwit Teller & Co. letterhead.
- <sup>15</sup> Zhao, Feng, "Silk Roundels from the Sui to the Tang," Hali, May 1997, 81.
- <sup>16</sup> The bronze mirrors were ornamented with, among other motifs, small and angular elements that resemble the Roman letters T, L, and V. Michael Sullivan, The Arts of China (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 238.
- <sup>17</sup> Stewart Culin, 1922 Expedition Report, Archives, Art Reference Library, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York, 173-176.

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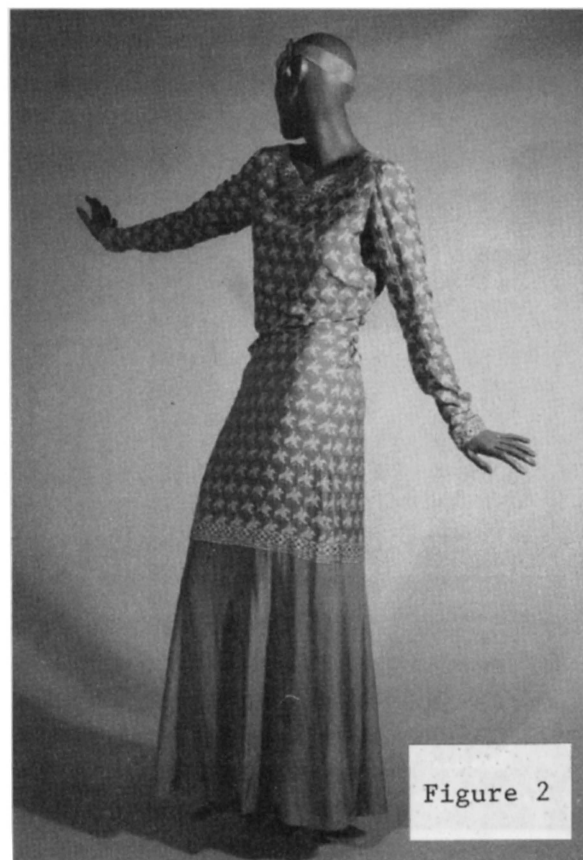
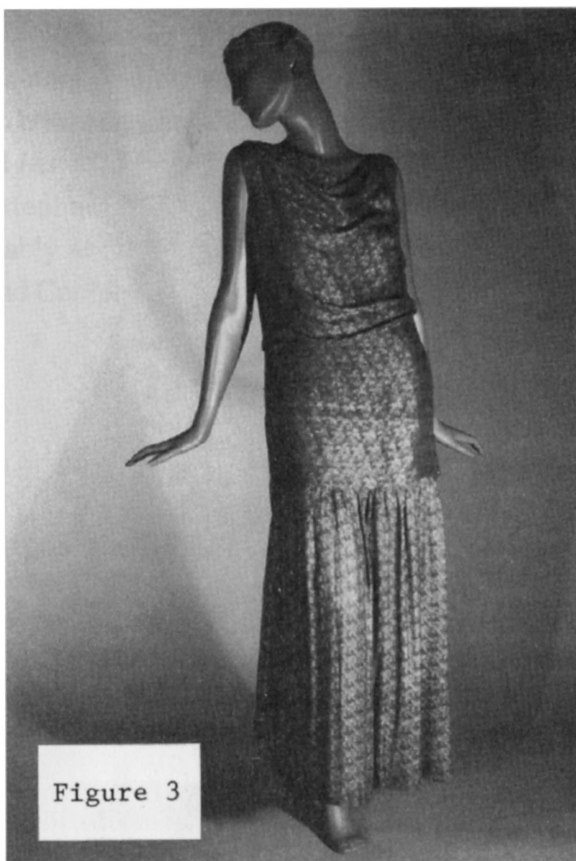
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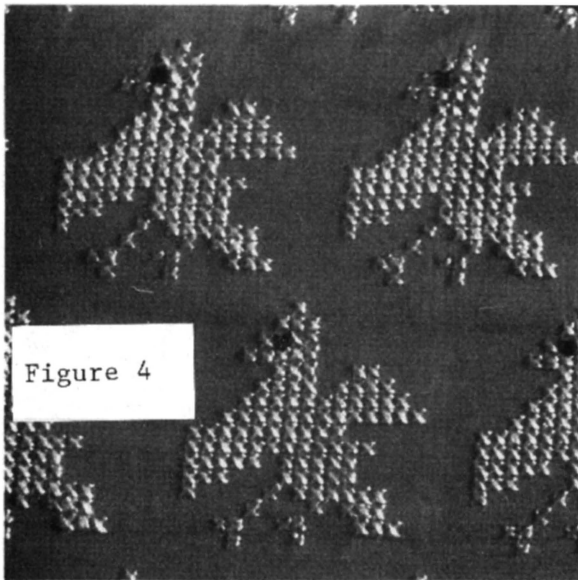


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



### This Document Gown

suggested by a Pollaiuolo portrait, typifies Jessie Franklin Turner's philosophy of clothes. ♣ She believes in distinction rather than fashion... and finds her inspiration all over the world and all through the centuries. ♣ Her special fabrics are woven to her own specifications. Her exquisitely subtle colors are dyed by her own formulas. ♣ From the simplest day dress to the most important tea or evening gown, every design in her new collection has a portrait quality, a timeless beauty of line and color, to express the innate aristocracy of the woman who will wear it.

*Jessie Franklin Turner*

410 PARK AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY



Figure 7