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# THE ASSOCIATED AMERICAN ARTISTS: TEXTILE ART FOR THE MASSES

**Karen Herbaugh**

The American Textile History Museum acquired its first Associated American Artists fabric in 1996. From a curatorial viewpoint the fabric was intriguing because although it's rare that useful information is printed in the selvage, this fabric was labeled "A SIGNATURE FABRIC "GAY FACADE" © CREATED BY JOHN HULL OF ASSOCIATED AMERICAN ARTISTS." As the Museum expanded its collection of AAA fabrics it was discovered that most of these fabrics also have the date printed on them. The selvage inscriptions and the nature of the designs and fabric names prompted further exploration of the organization.

## **Organizational History**

In 1934 the Associated American Artists organized, under the leadership of Reeves Lewenthal, with the mission to bridge the gap between artists and their audiences by making fine art affordable. Lewenthal believed the purpose of the organization was two-fold: to disseminate art that would elevate the American artist, and to increase the public's appreciation of art. This conviction led to a nationwide collaboration with fifty department stores that agreed to display and sell signed etchings and lithographs by artists belonging to this newly formed group, most notably Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. The artwork which would have sold for \$20-\$50 in galleries was sold for \$5.00 on the theory that anyone with an aesthetic sense should be able to purchase fine art regardless of their income level.

After the initial release in department stores the Associated American Artists began offering their work through catalogues because they felt they could then reach a larger, international audience. Just five years later, in 1939, the organization opened its first gallery selling paintings, sculpture, watercolors, and fine prints. By the late 1990s the gallery was no longer an independent organization but owned by Associated Group, a company operating primarily in the wireless communication and radio broadcasting industries. AT&T bought out Associated Group in 1999 and the gallery, which was last located at 20 West 57<sup>th</sup> Street appears to have gone out of business sometime after February 2000.

## **Riverdale and Lowenstein Fabric Lines**

Between 1952 and 1957, the Associated American Artists expanded their merchandising theories to include designing fabrics for both the apparel and interior markets. These fabrics, the majority titled, signed, and dated in the selvage, were heralded at their introduction by newspaper articles, shelter and apparel magazines--both for the public and the trade.

Under the direction of Lewenthal, the Associated American Artists entered the textile market in 1952 by first working with Riverdale Manufacturing to produce designs for interior furnishing fabrics. On the introduction of this inaugural collection, entitled "Pioneer Pathways," Lewenthal was quoted in a *House & Garden* article stating, "Art needn't be mysterious.... Today's artist is a designer...and every American room can become a showcase for his genius."<sup>1</sup> Macy's

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<sup>1</sup> "American Artists Design and Sign New Fabrics", *House & Garden*, April 1952, p. 122.

department store was integral in the promotion of the early interior fabrics, creating vignettes throughout their New York City store to introduce each fabric line and companion ceramic products by Stonelain.

The following are five of the eight designs from the “Pioneer Pathways” which was inspired by American culture and folklore. “American Splendor” was designed by Luigi Lucioni, who was born in Malnate, Italy, and is largely known for his landscapes of Vermont. The “Ride of Paul Revere” was the work of Grant Wood. Wood died in 1942 before the fabric was produced, but he had been a member of the Associated American Artists. Perhaps the group wanted to include his design in the initial fabric line because his name was more well-known than the other artists and would be a marketing asset. “Pioneer Pathways” was designed by Anton Refregier, who was born in Russia, studied in Munich and at the Rhode Island School of Design, and is best known as a muralist. “Curio Cabinet” was by Doris Lee, considered to be a folk artist, painter and lithographer. “Family Album” was by Laura Jean Allen who had studied in Philadelphia at the Pennsylvania Museum School and was one of the most prolific Associated American Artists designers.



“Pioneer Pathways,” by Anton Refregier, 1952.  
American Textile History Museum (1997.21)



“Family Album,” by Laura Jean Allen, , 1952.  
American Textile History Museum (1998.21.3)

To date, limited information has been uncovered about the relationship between Riverdale and Associated American Artists. However, through trade literature it is known that Riverdale printed on sailcloth or bark-textured cotton. The extant fabrics also reveal information: stamped on each selvedge is a legend that indicates the fabrics were printed with "vat dyes" and have been "shrunketized," apparently meaning the fabric will not shrink more than 2%. According to *Retailing Daily*, designs by Associated American Artists were submitted to Riverdale, and then **their** design staff chose the final prints.<sup>2</sup>

According to a 1953 article in *Retailing Daily*, the second Riverdale line was supposed to be “...much more commercially promising than the initial group.”<sup>3</sup> “Manuscript” is the only fabric dated after 1952 documented as yet in this research, suggesting that the relationship between

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<sup>2</sup> Newspaper clipping, *Retailing Daily*, Thursday, March 5, 1953, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian, Microfilmed, Associated American Artists records, 1934-1981, New York, NY.

<sup>3</sup> Newspaper clipping, *Retailing Daily*, Thursday, March 5, 1953, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian, Microfilmed, Associated American Artists records, 1934-1981, New York, NY.

Riverdale and the Associated American Artists was short-lived.

M. Lowenstein and Sons began their collaboration with the Associated American Artists in 1952 marketing the idea of “signed” original fine art by the yard under the name Signature Fabrics. Lowenstein advertisements continually refer to the artists as “internationally renowned painter-members”<sup>4</sup> of AAA.

The 1952 Summer issue of *American Fabrics* had the following commentary:

To textile design these artists bring a completely new and fresh approach, a fine arts feeling and the inherent qualities of the easel painter’s genius. The beauty of their designs is diverse and their use of color rich and varied. The style of each artist has been indelibly transferred to fabric.<sup>5</sup>

Lowenstein continued to advertise in *American Fabrics* throughout 1955 and 1956 promoting the fabric designs as innovative, “Only the imaginative fine artist could create such designs of originality ... designs that are years ahead”<sup>6</sup> and that Signature fabrics was the only company producing designs by artists. “This *marriage* of American art and American Fashion, that is Signature’s *alone*....”<sup>7</sup> This is an interesting marketing approach because Fuller Fabrics launched the Modern Master Prints in 1955 which introduced fabric designed by artists’ that were more widely known, such as Pablo Picasso and Raoul Dufy.

Although Fall 1956 advertisements allude to the “Signature Originals” that would appear in 1957, currently only one fabric, “Soap n’ Water,” has been found to date from that year and only one, “Victoriana,” from 1956. Based on the wealth of extant fabrics dating from 1952-1955 the author’s preliminary findings seem to indicate that the relationship between the Associated American Artists and M. Lowenstein and Sons was coming to a close by 1956.



“Soap n’ Water,” by unidentified artist, 1957.  
American Textile History Museum (2002.30.4)

The American Textile History Museum has over forty Associated American Artists fabrics, some with multiple colorways. At least twenty-four designs have also been identified in other museum and private collections. Among ATHM’s costume artifacts are three shirts, two skirts, and two

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<sup>4</sup> Advertisement, *American Fabrics*, #22 (Summer 1952), p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Advertisement, *American Fabrics*, #22, (Summer 1952), p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> Advertisement, *American Fabrics*, #38, (Fall 1956), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Advertisement, *American Fabrics*, #35, (Winter 1955-1956), p. 24.

dressess made from AAA fabrics. Two of the shirts have Catalina Sportswear labels, indicating sales to commercial clothing manufacturers as well as to home sewers. Through extant objects, magazines, advertisements and newspaper articles, fifty-three Associated American Artists who created textile designs have been identified. Multiple designs were created by many, while only one print has been documented for other members of the group at this time.

The author's ongoing research of the Associated American Artists will continue to explore the history of the organization; its artists and their motives for expanding their artistic media; the textile designs and how they relate to other printed fabrics of the period; and, not least, the manufacturers and why they considered this partnership with the Associated American Artists good for business.

The following tables identify the designs documented in this research that were created for Riverdale and Lowenstein fabrics by the Associated American Artists between 1952 and 1957.<sup>8</sup>

Riverdale Fabrics			
Artist	Fabric Name	Date	Collection
Luigi Lucioni	American Splendor	1952	ATHM <sup>9</sup>
Grant Wood	Ride of Paul Revere	1952	ATHM
Anton Refregier	Pioneer Pathways	1952	ATHM
Doris Lee	Curio Cabinet	1952	ATHM
Laura Jean Allen	Family Album	1952	ATHM
John Hull	Trade winds (2 colorways)	1952	ATHM
Arnold Blanch	Enchanted waters	1952	Cora Ginsburg <sup>10</sup>
Aaron Bohrod	Pagan Magic	1952	ATHM
Robert Scheeberg	Summer Symphony	1952	Cora Ginsburg
Albert John Pucci	Heirlooms (2 colorways)	1952	ATHM
William Ward Beecher	Treasure Trove	1952	ATHM
Louise Phillips	Calories	1952	Cora Ginsburg
William Ward Beecher	Manuscript	1953	Cora Ginsburg
John Little	Oak Leaf	ND	Cora Ginsburg

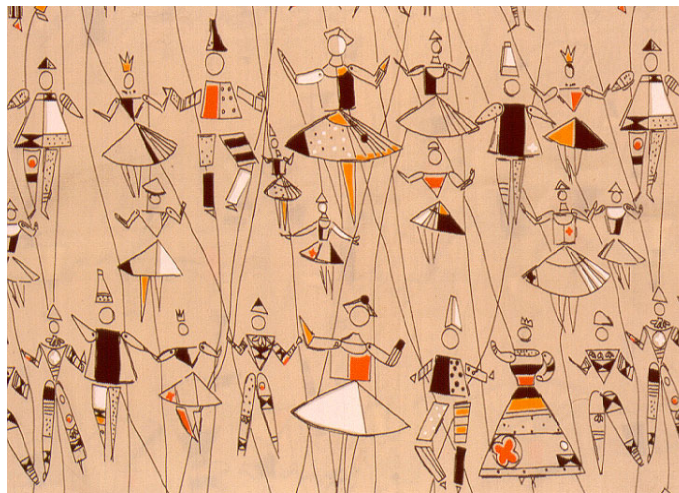
<sup>8</sup> These tables list the slides of Riverdale and Lowenstein fabrics as presented at the TSA 2002 Symposium. Other known examples were not included in the presentation and are not listed in the tables.

<sup>9</sup> In the collection of the American Textile History Museum.

<sup>10</sup> Courtesy of Cora Ginsburg, LLC.

Lowenstein Fabrics			
Artist	Fabric Name	Date	Collection
John Hull	Gay Façade	1952	ATHM
Richard Munsell	Aquaria	1952	ATHM
Anton Refregier	Open Sesame	1952	ATHM
Charles Harper	On the Hook	1953	ATHM
Joe Richards	Spindrift	1953	ATHM
Hans Moller	Bird-in-a-Box	1953	ATHM
Jacqueline Groag	Puppet Ballet	1953	ATHM
Albert John Pucci	Duck Blind	1953	ATHM
Joe Jones	Linear Antics (skirt)	1953	ATHM
Vincent Malta	Iliad (skirt)	1953	ATHM
Laura Jean Allen	Hook n' Ladder (shirt)	1953	ATHM
Laura Jean Allen	Choo Choo	1953	Cora Ginsburg
Laura Jean Allen	Whimsy Town	1953	Cora Ginsburg
Joe Jones	Antique Watermarks	1953	Cora Ginsburg
Richard Munsell	Dune Grass	1953	Cora Ginsburg
Louise Phillips	Pin-ups	1953	ATHM
Ann Smith	Strange Birds	1953	Cora Ginsburg
Lamartine Le Goullon	Futuriste	1953	Cora Ginsburg
Lamartine Le Goullon	Egyptienne	1954	ATHM
Lamartine Le Goullon	Flying Feathers	1954	Cora Ginsburg
Ramon Prats	Mosaic	1954	ATHM
Gandy	Gentle Poppies	1954	ATHM
Hans Moller	Fairy Tale	1954	ATHM
Hans Moller	La Vie en Rose	1954	ATHM
Yarlekovic	Carousel (dress and yardage)	1954	ATHM

Roger Chapin	Feathery Stripe	1954	ATHM
Norman Brenner	Nostalgia	1954	Cora Ginsburg
Howard Low	School Days	1954	Cora Ginsburg
Albert John Pucci	Harvest	1955	ATHM
Lamartine Le Goullon	49'er (dress and yardage)	1955	ATHM
Laura Jean Allen	Victoriana	1956	ATHM
Unknown	Soap n' Water	1957	ATHM
Brian Connelly	Marbles	ND	Cora Ginsburg
Brian Connelly	Golf Magic	ND	ATHM
William Ward Beecher	Button Button	ND	Cora Ginsburg
Charlotte Sternberg	Snowflakes	ND	ATHM
Laura Jean Allen	Apothecary Shop	ND	Cora Ginsburg
Ken Davies	Thimbles and Thread	ND	ATHM



“Puppet Ballet,” by Jacqueline Groag, 1953.  
American Textile History Museum (1999.35.1)