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RUTH REEVES' "PERSONAL PRINTS"
PRINTED TEXTILES FROM THE 1930's and 40's¹

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INTRODUCTION

Ruth Reeves pioneered the use of vat dyes and the screen-print process for furnishing fabrics in the late 1920's. Reeves had a positive genius for publicity, and if she was not the first American to experiment with these techniques, which she may well have been, she was without doubt one of the best known.

Reeves was one of a new breed of textile designers who emerged in the aftermath of the First World War. To hope to work as a textile designer was a risky experiment in itself. American mills employed buyers and copyists in far greater numbers than they did designers, and consequently training in the field was largely unobtainable. As one critic of the system wrote

...textile pattern making was regarded as the lowest and worst paid of the arts. Quite properly our art schools ignored it, since it offered absolutely no field for ambition.²

And so when Ruth Reeves began to exhibit her witty and original hand-printed fabrics, the design press took notice, calling her work modern and refreshing, chic, and above all American.

Reeves trained as an artist and she may have gone on to learn the essentials of printing in Paris, where she spent the years from 1921 to c. 1928. In Paris she studied with the painter Fernand Léger, who also designed textiles. She knew Raoul Dufy in Paris, and certainly would have known his work for Bianchini-Férier, and she may have known Sonia and Robert Delauney, frequent visitors to Léger's studio.

Reeves returned to the States in 1928. The wisdom of the times held that America had no design traditions of its own, probably had no sources of original design, and that modern design was almost by definition a European import. Citing those reasons, we had declined to participate in the 1925 Paris Exposition of Decorative and Industrial Arts. Consequently when Reeves and her colleagues opened the American Designers' Gallery late in 1928 to prove that there was indeed such a thing as American modernism, most critics, if not all, were on their side from the start. Ruth's work was found to be particularly representative of the American experience.

"PERSONAL PRINTS"

As an artist, Ruth Reeves believed that anything which elicited a strong personal response could serve as the basis for creative design.

She often used her own life or the lives of her friends as a sourcebook. One of Reeves' earliest pieces is called "South Mountain", named for the road Ruth and her family lived on in the artists' colony of New City, NY. "South Mountain" is an autobiographical piece, a family portrait designed as a slightly tongue-in-cheek version of a toile de Jouy. In this domestic scene, Ruth's infant daughter emerges from her bath in front of the kitchen stove to be wrapped in a towel, while her two older daughters, naked, await their turn. Ruth's husband officiates, while Ruth and a visitor observe this bed time ritual. The resident cat turns sharply away, as though spotting a mouse.

Early in her career Ruth Reeves produced several such narrative pieces, which the press dubbed "personal prints". Some, like "South Mountain", "An American Family" or "The Longfellow Family Print", were privately commissioned and printed in limited edition. Others, as we shall see, were intended for production. One of the things which characterizes Reeves' work in this idiom is her ability to take familiar objects and events, like her daughter's bath time and the pot-bellied stove in "South Mountain", or the Ford V-8 and child with her toy bucket in "An American Family", and use them to produce patterns which celebrate a way of life that seems distinctly and uniquely American.

Of course it's an idealized and romantic vision of a life which few families, including Reeves' own, could sustain as the world headed into the Depression.

THE W&J SLOANE COMPANY

One of Reeves' best known narrative pieces is called simply "American Scene", designed for the W&J Sloane Company. In 1930 Reeves designed a series of textiles for Sloane's. More of this collection survives than from any other, which is one of the reasons why Reeves' and Sloane's names are so often linked in today's design literature. In fact, the collaboration was not a happy one.

According to one account, Reeves had talked Sloane's into commissioning her to design a group of textiles to be submitted jointly to the American Federation of Art for inclusion in their International Exhibition of Decorative Metalwork and Cotton Textiles. Ruth's juried work comprised the largest entry from any single designer or manufacturer. On the grounds that it represented an almost unprecedented collaboration between a forward-looking manufacturer and an American artist, the commission received an enormous amount of press coverage. The 'official' story was that for once the artist was given complete freedom to design as she liked. In actual fact, Sloane's might well have put a stop to the experiment, had they known more about it. Reeves later explained that the store's head of textile production had broken his leg and couldn't get out to the studio in the country to see what she was up to. When she finally made delivery of some three hundred yards of fabric, the man was so horrified, not only at the designs themselves, but at the unconventional ground cloths Ruth used for printing, that he tried to reject the whole order. Fortunately Ruth had a contract.

Nor does the story end there. Sloane's had also arranged a touring show of some two dozen Reeves' textiles to coincide with the itinerary of the AFA show. While the latter was at the Art Institute

of Chicago, for example, the Sloane's show could be seen at Au Paradis on North Michigan Avenue, where of course the fabrics could also be ordered. But apparently the textiles simply didn't sell--at least not in sufficient quantity to justify mass production--and Sloane's put out the word that Ruth was poison.³ Certainly she never designed for them again, and in fact received few commissions from industry in the course of her thirty year career.

This may have suited her vision of herself as an artist who pointed the way. Ruth Reeves often referred to herself as an industrial designer, but it may be more accurate to say that she was a craftsman who hoped to influence the industry by example. She was more interested in raising the general level of taste than in meeting it, and it is not surprising if this lead to problems with manufacturers.

TEXTILES DERIVED FROM PAINTINGS

Apart from public or private commissions, Reeves' principal means of support were foundation grants. In the course of her lifetime Ruth Reeves received a Carnegie Traveling Fellowship, two Guggenheim grants, a Fulbright award and support from the Ford Foundation. Usually the grant would be for field research which ultimately resulted in a collection of exhibition textiles. Armed with a grant from, say, the Guggenheim Foundation, Ruth would secure the promise of a gallery or museum show. With those two birds in hand, she would approach a manufacturer, who was usually willing to subsidize a limited print run in exchange for the ensuing publicity. Ruth certainly didn't get rich this way, but she did manage to survive, and she remained at all times in control of the artistic product, which was the main thing.

Because she was trained as a painter, Reeves frequently worked out her ideas in oil on canvas before abstracting and simplifying elements for use in a patterned repeat. She often exhibited her textiles together with the paintings and drawings which inspired them. In 1933 Ruth Reeves received a grant from the Gardner School Alumnae Fund to execute a series of contemporary textiles based on the Hudson River School of landscape painting. The grant was awarded because

It was felt that her idea of perpetrating the present scene in fabrics might initiate as significant a trend in textile design as that which produced the French toiles which recorded the story of French life of that day.⁴

Reeves exhibited the resulting series of five textiles in 1934 at the National Alliance of Art and Industry. While no history of purchase remains associated with the majority of Reeves' designs, portions of this series are in collections in Cleveland, Boston, Minneapolis and Wisconsin, so perhaps it may be safe to say that as a group they sold well.

Wanderlust overcame Ruth from time to time, despite the fact that she was for all intents and purposes the sole supporter of three daughters. While she was preparing the Hudson River textiles for exhibition, she was also preparing to spend the next three months in Guatemala as a Carnegie Fellow. The Carnegie Institution was

engaged in a lengthy study of Highland craft tradition. The project required specialists, and Ruth was chosen to collect and document traditional clothing and textiles. The resulting collection, now at the Peabody Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, would serve as a springboard for a group of Ruth's own designs based on Guatemalan sources. They, in their turn, would stimulate the U.S. textile industry's use of new and provocative material.

Whether this happened is impossible to say, although the popular press behaved as though it did, with House Beautiful, for example, advising its readers "Miss Reeves has started something. If you don't know where Guatemala is, you had better surreptitiously consult an atlas"⁵.

The Guatemala show, "Textiles and Costumes Collected by Miss Ruth Reeves" opened at the RCA building in March 1935 before beginning a two year tour of the United States. Ruth showed thirty-five original designs and well over one hundred textiles and costumes indigenous to the Guatemalan Highlands. Macy's climbed onto the bandwagon and put five Reeves' designs into production for sale during their "Guatemala House" promotion. As an employee of the Carnegie Corporation, Reeves was not entitled to any compensation from Macy's. Instead, she was supposed to receive credit in all their related advertising, which she did not.⁶

Reeves' interest in the cultures of South and Central America can be traced to her association with two men who had a profound influence on her throughout the 1920's. Stewart Culin was Curator of Ethnology at The Brooklyn Museum. M.D.C. Crawford, writer, editor and textile enthusiast fought a tremendous battle during World War I to win acceptance for the design traditions of all the Americas. Culin was Crawford's chief ally and Ruth Reeves was their disciple. She, too, fought to bring honor and recognition to indigenous craft traditions. After the Guatemala show, Reeves spent four years launching what would ultimately become The Index of American Design. Ruth Reeves was its principal architect.

This was followed in 1940 by eighteen months in South America under the auspices of the Guggenheim Foundation where Ruth continued to study the art of the Andean people she had first discovered some twenty years earlier under the tutelage of Messrs. Crawford and Culin. Her ultimate goal in those wartime years was to foster an appreciation for the arts of Latin America that was equal to our appreciation of their raw materials. In this, she did not succeed.

Ruth Reeves was descended from pioneer stock and from two generations of missionaries on her mother's side. In a sense she remained true to those roots. She was a pioneer in the field of textile design, and she chartered a course in National style.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on my research for a longer study of Ruth Reeves, begun as a Master's thesis for the Fashion Institute of Technology.
2. M.D.C. Crawford, The Heritage of Cotton (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1924), 198.
3. Ruth Reeves' papers, The Archives of American Art, reels 3093 and 137. See also Ralph M. Pearson, "Ruth Reeves" in Critical Appreciation Course II: The Modern Renaissance in the USA (Nyack NY: The Design Workshop, nd.) 91-96.
4. Elizabeth McRae Boykin, "Roosevelt Home at Hyde Park Motif of New Drapery Fabric", New York Sun, March 29, 1934, 36. [Interview with the head of the Gardner School Alumnae Fund].
5. "Guatemalan Summer", House Beautiful, April 1935, 69.
6. Ruth Reeves' papers, The Carnegie Institute, Washington, DC, and advertisement for Macy's in The New York Herald Tribune, February 17, 1935, 11.

