

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

1990

Trade and the Post War Textile Industry in the United States

Lynn Felsher

Fashion Institute of Technology

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Felsher, Lynn, "Trade and the Post War Textile Industry in the United States" (1990). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 601.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/601>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

"Trade and the Post War Textile Industry in the United States"

Lynn Felsher
Design Laboratory
Fashion Institute of Technology
New York, NY 10001

A large portion of textiles designed for the United States are no longer being made in this country. Instead they are manufactured in Europe, the Pacific Rim, including Japan, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, the Philippines, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean.

The initial design source of these textiles may still be the United States, but even this in light of my current research is ambiguous. I intend to show several textiles which though made for the U.S. market were not manufactured in this country. Their provenance is based upon interviews conducted with the textiles' designers, the country of origin labels attached to many of the textiles and the Design Laboratory's textile collection which was the initial source for their designs and in whose collection these now reside.

Changes in the designing and manufacturing of textiles in the U.S. over the past 15 years can be linked to economic, social and political conditions. In broad terms these include United States protectionist policies--tariffs, quotas, government subsidies and legislation,¹ a strong or weak dollar relative to foreign currencies, a resistance by American mills to change in the form of new technology and design experimentation, and an isolationist view by these companies toward the rest of the textile producing world.

In addition the many international textile fairs that have proliferated in the post-war period in France, Germany, Italy, England, the United States, and most recently in Hong Kong, exhibiting textiles mainly from Europe have become for American companies and their designers an important setting in which to examine what has been newly introduced and which can be reinterpreted for the American market. In addition textile forecast services and trade periodicals have chronicled the importance of the trade fairs and European textiles.

The accessibility of Europe and the economic cost effectiveness of manufacturing in the Orient, Europe and the Caribbean has changed the way textiles are designed and manufactured for the American market.

In the immediate post-WW II period the majority of textiles sold in the U.S. were manufactured here. American Fabrics a trade publication begun in 1946, expressed in its pages the textile industry's chauvinistic attitude towards its capa-

bilities, while at the same time trying to educate its readership to the dangers of complacency in mass producing unimaginative textiles. American Fabrics encouraged textile designers to use museum collections as an important source for their work. It was not unusual during the late '40s through the early '60s for the magazine to include at least one photographic essay on museum collections or a related art historical subject accompanied by a discussion on the inspiring possibilities.

The magazine in its editorials tried to foster the notion that good design and mass production were compatible. In an article in 1948, "The Textile Road into the Future," editors expressed this view as follows: "...volume, production and creative expression are completely reconcilable."² And further in the same article:

...proper creative development can stimulate greater volume in textiles and in the end-use products of the textile industry.³

The importance of "creative thinking" instead of "creative starvation"⁴ was of primary importance to the editors. Thus there was very little mention of Europe, international fairs including the Festival of Britain in 1951 or the 1st International Textile Exhibition held in Lille in April 1951.⁵ In fact in the Autumn 1953 issue, the magazine criticized U.S. manufacturers and retailers who turned to foreign mills for fabrics with originality and newness, and asked, "Why is it necessary for American designers to go to Europe?"⁶ It is rather amusing and hypocritical that at the same time the magazine was reporting on the latest textiles from the new French couture collections.⁷

The Design Laboratory's collection formed under the direction of Stewart Culin and Herbert Spinden in the Industrial Arts department of the Brooklyn Museum, had instituted a policy of allowing designers, manufacturers and retailers access to museum collections during WWI, when American designers were cut off from Paris.⁸ The Metropolitan Museum of Art had a similar policy having opened its study rooms in 1917. Here American manufacturers could also find design inspiration.⁹ The Edward C. Blum Design Laboratory dedicated in 1948 at the Brooklyn Museum continued to work closely with American manufacturers. This policy has continued with the collection's move to the Fashion Institute of Technology.

The following textiles are representative of the types of textiles produced during the 1980's. They were manufactured for U.S. companies, and designed for sale in this country. The designers who selected textiles from the Design Laboratory's collection for their work were primarily interested in the surface patterns and not in analyzing fabric struc-

ture or technique.

These textiles too frequently imitate their original source material and are unfortunately typical of much that is passing for textile design today. American Fabrics I believe was right when it warned designers to beware of creative starvation.

According to the design director at Adrienne Vittadini, Inc. the "Made in Hong Kong" label is not entirely accurate. The sweater constructed of several pieces was assembled: stitched, washed and blocked in Hong Kong. The actual knitting was carried out in China. And yet, under U.S. law the label inside the sweater stating that it was "Made in Hong Kong" is legal and considered an accurate representation of the sweater's provenance.¹⁰

Country of origin guidelines for textiles and textile products were established under section 204 of the Agricultural Act of 1956, and include provisions subject to the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA) of 1985.¹¹ The rulings pertain to textiles and textile products made predominantly of cotton, wool or man-made fibers, or any other textile fiber covered under any textile trade agreement.

The criteria established under the MFA for determining the country of origin of a textile or textile product is termed "substantial transformation."¹² In other words, the legal country of origin would be the last country in which the textile or textile product was sufficiently altered. According to U.S. Customs this includes manufacturing and processing; printing or dyeing; cutting or hemming or altering the article to create something new and different, a sweater, skirt or a tie.¹³

The historian faced with identifying a contemporary textile, must now determine its provenance or provenances in light of U.S. law. Access to the textile designer or company if possible would help. Examining the papers which all companies must file with Customs when importing goods into the U.S. would be another avenue to pursue. These papers must list each country where a manufacturing or processing step has taken place.¹⁴

To continue, a number of textiles were designed by GFT-USA, a multi-national conglomerate with headquarters in Italy and a subsidiary in the United States. These textiles were designed in the U.S. for men's shirts and woven in Japan.

The finished fabrics were shipped from Japan to Hong Kong where they were cut and sewn into men's shirts and "Made in Hong Kong" labels were sewn into each shirt in compliance with U.S. law.

Commercially produced in Italian mills, according to Zanzara's vice-president, the silk grounds for their printed ties are either woven in Italy or China. Their textiles imported to the U.S. as finished ties are labeled "Made in Italy." The woven and printed silks, designed by Zanzara are commercially manufactured in several Italian mills, labeled with the name of the men's wear designer Andrew Fezza, for whom these ties were made.¹⁵

From the early '70s a steadily increasing number of textiles of European and Asian manufacture were finding their way to the U.S. market. This increasing volume was, in part, related to business practices and attitudes in the textile industry in this country.

American Fabrics had from the early 1950s warned of creative starvation and the mills' desire for producing large quantities of a limited number of fabrics. This has led to the mills' unwillingness to work with designers in developing new fabrics and in producing smaller quantities of these fabrics.

Several designers whose work we have been examining were asked to explain their reasons for working in countries other than the United States. They spoke of favorable economic conditions and ease in working with foreign mills as important factors. In other words it is economically advantageous to work with a mill willing to weave, print or knit textiles to one's specifications without having to purchase the thousands of yards required by an American manufacturer.

For example, when Zanzara places an order with an Italian mill to manufacture its woven silks, they are obligated to purchase only 10 meters of one design. When ordering printed silks, the minimum is 40 meters in each of 3 or 4 colorways.¹⁶ When GFT-USA orders fabric from a Japanese mill, the minimum is 1000 yards for each textile.¹⁷

The radical changes in textile production, the decreasing number of textile mills and shifts to overseas production by many firms is also reflected, I believe, by changes that have occurred in the types of firms who use the F.I.T. Design Laboratory.

Before presenting these findings, I wish to say that this was only a rough survey without benefit of a control group or sophisticated tables. I looked at three different years: 1977/78, 1983 and 1989.

In the first year of the survey, which corresponds to the first year the Design Laboratory was functioning at F.I.T., slightly less than half of the total number of companies were U.S. mills. By the last year of the survey, 1989, the

total number of mills had increased, but their percentage of the total was only 10%. The category which I feel is most reflective of the expanded importance of overseas production is one I have identified as apparel designers/manufacturers; companies whose merchandisers or design staff develop the textiles for their own apparel collections. Adrienne Vittadini, Gloria Sachs Design, Anne Klein Studio, Ralph Lauren, Gordon Henderson and JH Collectibles would be such companies. In the survey's first year this category did not exist; in 1983 this segment was 30% of the total and in 1989 it had grown to approximately 57%. These manufacturers of men's, women's and children's apparel work directly with mills that weave, print or knit textiles exclusively for their own use. This is also the case in the department store and specialty category. In 1977/78 we had two stores, in 1983 there were 7, and in 1989 there were 24, with some stores, Saks Fifth Avenue, Federated Department Stores and Macy's employing designers in several divisions from furnishings, men's shirts, women's sportswear and accessories.

With the following textiles the attributions are less ambiguous, in these cases the textiles have not been altered to the extent of those previously shown. Here substantial transformation is defined as printing by the Customs Service.

A third component of trade is the influence of European textiles, especially from France and Italy on those created for the American market.

Knowledge of these textiles for many American companies in the immediate post-war period was acquired through trade periodicals as noted earlier. Another source were sample books assembled by several French and Italian firms containing contemporary textiles from French and Italian mills. The books were arranged by fabric structure and usage: women's wear woven wools, printed silks, men's wear worsted and woolen fabrics, woven jacquards and knitted fabrics, and by season: Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer.¹⁸

Published 6 months to 1 year in advance of the intended Fall/Winter or Spring/Summer season these sample books were either purchased in Europe or through a U.S. agent. F.I.T. has an extensive collection representing several French and Italian companies, Societes Des Nouveautes Textiles, Textile-Paris-Echos, J. Claude Freres, Bilbille & Co., Alberto & Roy and Texital-Novita-Milano.

Our earliest sample book from this period is dated May 1, 1955. The printed silks are arranged two to a page and are briefly described in french.

In later books, the samples are identified in English, by

fabric structure, fiber content and weight. This is so in a sample book from Bilbille & Co., titled Woollens Yarn Dyed, September 1965.¹⁹

Several of the sample book services as they were known continued to publish through the 1980's. However, in the mid-60's a second more organized and developed business emerged. These companies referred to as forecasters or forecasting services including Nigel French, Promostyl and I. M. International²⁰, and were followed by Here & There, T.F.S. (The Fashion Service) and Trends Union, to name several others.

The forecasters continued as their predecessors had done, to report to their clients in the U.S. on the latest developments in textiles and fashion. The forecast services annually published a series of books with photographs and actual samples. Each book focused on a different aspect of the textile industry and presented new design, color and fabric structures that they believed would be important to the textile designer. The textile samples in the books were arranged in thematic categories: for example exaggerated weaves and textures, yarn dyes and jacquards, or mini patterns with texture.²¹ They were published approximately 1 year in advance of the Fall/Winter or Spring/Summer season. They reported on the textiles used in European fashion collections and what was exhibited at the international textile fairs.

The next two slides are from a textile forecast book published by Here & There. This particular book was dated January 1986 and described the pertinent design themes displayed at several of the European textile fairs held in the fall of 1985. Their predictions were for the following year.

The international textile fairs which take place biannually are considered extremely important to American textile designers and manufacturers. These exhibitions present the textile collections of companies one year prior to their being seen by the public at large.

The fairs for apparel and furnishing fabrics are held separately. The important apparel textile fairs are in Paris, Frankfurt and Cernobbio; they are Premier Vision, Interstoff and Idea Como. Furnishing fabrics are exhibited at Heimtextil in Germany, La Bienale and TexStyles in Paris.

The first of the textile fairs and now the largest for apparel fabrics is Interstoff. Its first show was in July of 1959. Premier Vision established in 1977 is considered to be the more important and prestigious of the fairs. Only European firms are allowed to exhibit their latest collections at Premier Vision. According to Women's Wear Daily

approximately 40,000 visitors attended the last fair held this past March with 647 exhibitors.²²

The textiles exhibited at the fairs are important sources for American designers and manufacturers who either attend the fairs, receive reports through the forecast services like Here & There or read about the important new trends in the many trade periodicals. Premier Vision also publishes a daily newspaper during the show in French and English. The newspaper identifies the textiles which are the focus of the most attention.²³ Premier Vision also publishes a book at each fair in which the show's organizers present what they consider to be the important design, color and fabrication directions for the following year.

Several of the popular fashion magazines - Mademoiselle, Glamour, and Harper's Bazaar sent their fabric editors to the fairs. Their observations later presented in their New York offices were replete with fabric samples and the latest data. Several of the fiber companies, Eastman Chemical, Monsanto, Hoescht-Celanese and DuPont made similar trips and similar presentations, only DuPont still remains.

No longer is it economically feasible to maintain fabric libraries and research departments. Europe is accessible, and so is the Orient, rapid communication between companies via the fax machine, competition from well organized forecasting services and ever decreasing numbers of American textile manufacturers have made these fabric and research departments too expensive to maintain.

To conclude, in light of present economic and design realities, assigning a provenance to many of today's textiles is a complex process. When the source of a textile's design is found in Europe and in the collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology, and the textile is produced and finished in a third or fourth country, and returned to the United States marketplace, then an accurate description of its provenance must include these components to be considered a historically accurate record.

ENDNOTES

1. H. Richard Firman, Patchwork Protectionism Textile Policy in the United States, Japan and West Germany, Cornell Studies in Political Economy, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. ix.

2. Sidney, Garfield, "The Textile Road Into the Future," American Fabrics, 2nd Quarter 1948, p.108.

3. Ibid., p 109.

4. "Creative Thinking vs. Creative Starvation," American Fabrics, Autumn 1951, p. 35.

5. "All Eyes Will Turn to Lille," Fall 1950, p. 133 and "Contemporary Swedish and English Designs," American Fabrics, Spring 1954, pp. 94-95.

6. "What Makes Your Business Good or Bad," American Fabrics, Spring 1954, p. 46.

7. "En Route From the 1953 Holiday Fashions," American Fabrics, Summer 1953, p. 69; "Winter 1953-54 Fashion Highlights," American Fabrics, Autumn 1953, p. 65 and "Capsule Report - Resort, Spring, Summer, 1956," American Fabrics, Fall 1955, p. 36.

8. Robert Riley, "The Design Laboratory," The Brooklyn Museum Annual, VII (1965-66):100-117; "A & S Gives Brooklyn Museum \$50,000 for Design Project," Women's Wear Daily, 2 April 1948 and Elizabeth Ann Coleman, "The Role of the Brooklyn Museum in Mass Produced Fashions: A Historical Review," paper presented at the V Covegno Internazionale Centro Italiano Per Lo Studio Del Tessuto, Milan, Italy 26-28 February 1990.

9. Christine Wallace Laidlaw, "The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Modern Design: 1917-29," The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts 8 (Spring 1988):90-91.

10. Telephone interview with Odile Laugier, Adrienne Vittadini, Inc., New York, New York, 4 June 1990.

11. U.S. President, Proclamation, "Country of Origin Rules Regarding Imported Textiles and Textile Products," Federal Register 55 no. 41, 4 April 1990, 7303-4.

12. U.S. Customs Service, Treasury, Treasury. "Textiles and Textile Products," 19 Customs Service Regulations, 1 April 1989, sec. 12.130b.

13. Ibid., sec. 12.130d-e.

14. Ibid., sec. 12.130f.

15. Interview with Joseph Farinella, Zanzara International, Chicago, Illinois, 11 January 1990 and 27 July 1990.

16. Ibid.

17. Interview with William Garrett Bennett, Giordano Ltd., New York, New York, 25 June 1990.

18. Textile-Paris-Echos, Price List of Collections, swatched seasonal reports of color and fabric trends, New York, New York n.d. (Typewritten.)

19. Woollen Yarn Dyed No. 12 (Paris: Bilbille & Co., [September 1965]), p 1. The first page in English describes several design trends developing in woven wools for women's apparel including chess boards, herringbones, reversible fabrics, chevots and tweeds in the Scottish and Irish traditions. Presentation des Modeles en Couture Printemps, (Paris: Societe Des Nouveautes Textiles, [1959]) pp. 14 and 17. A separate chapter on the fabrics with subheadings listed as prints, grounds, classics, designs and half-classics. Descriptions of surface motifs and weave effects grouped by fiber appear from the same booklet and are Photogravure effects, Oriental designs, Cashemires or new Persian motifs, Byzantine engraving. Or under Fancy Dobbies one finds rustic basketweaves, herringbones, different crow's feet,...glenchecks and tweed effects. These booklets were published on the Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer French fashion collections. The Fashion Institute of Technology's collection is not complete, it begins with Spring 1959 and ends with Fall/Winter 1970.

20. "Are You Getting Enough Design Direction," New York Connection, no. 22 (1980), p. 68.

21. "Prato-Premier Vision-Idea Como-Interstoff-Textitalia January 1986" (New York: Here & There Inc. [1984]) p. 3.

22. "Fine Tuning Premier Vision," Women's Wear Daily, 15 May 1990, p. 16.

23. "The Visitors Have Their Say," Le Journal Premier Vision, no. 5, April 1990, p, 3. The best selling textiles were linen, canvas, mock plains -- chambray, end and end, iridescents, flowers and colors-- cobalt blue, sand and light pinks and yellows.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"A & S Gives Brooklyn Museum \$50,000 for Design Project." Women's Wear Daily, 2 April 1948.

"All Eyes Will Turn To Lille." American Fabrics, Fall 1950, p. 133.

"Are you Getting Enough Design Direction?" New York Connection, no. 22 (1980), p. 68.

"Capsule Report-Resort, Spring, Summer 1956." American Fabrics, Fall 1955, pp. 36-42.

"Contemporary Swedish and English Designs." American Fabrics, Spring 1954, pp. 94-95.

"Creative Thinking vs. Creative Starvation Part III." American Fabrics, Autumn 1951, pp. 35-39.

"En Route For The 1953 Holiday Fashions." American Fabrics, Summer 1953, p. 69.

"Fabric Shows Add Fashion Services." Daily News Record, 10 November 1989, p. 17.

"Fine Tuning Premier Vision." Women's Wear Daily, 2 April 1990, p. 16.

"Premier Vision, Crossroads of The Fashion And Textile Worlds," Press Breakfast, New York, New York, 29 November 1988. (Typewritten.)

"SA: Trekking to Europe For Fabric Direction." Women's Wear Daily, 15 May 1990, p. 16.

"Textile, Apparel Imports Surge With 30.4% Advance in October." Daily News Record, 18 December 1989, p. 6.

"The Visitors Have Their Say." Le Journal Premier Vision, April 1990, no. 5, p. 3.

"Washington Outlook." Textile World, April 1990, p. 20.

"What Makes Your Business Good or Bad?" American Fabrics, Spring 1954, pp. 45-46.

"Winter 1953-54 Fashion Highlights From Paris." American Fabrics, Autumn 1953, p. 65.

American Fabrics Fall 1946 - Winter 1965-66.

Bennett, William Garrett. Giordano Ltd., New York, New York. Interview, 25 June 1990.

Coleman, Elizabeth Ann, "The Role of the Brooklyn Museum in Mass Produced Fashions: A Historical Review." Paper presented at the V Internazionale Centro Italiano Per Lo Studio Della Storia Del Tessuto, Milan, Italy, 26-28 February 1990.

Farinella, Joseph. Zanzara International, Chicago, Illinois, 11 January 1990 and 27 July 1990.

Firman, H. Richard. Patchwork Protectionism Textile Policy in the United States, Japan and West Germany. --Cornell Studies in Political Economy. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Garfield, Sidney. "The Textile Road Into the Future." American Fabrics, 2nd Quarter 1948, p. 108-109.

Laidlaw, Christine Wallace. "The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Modern Design: 1917-1929." The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts 8 (Spring 1988):88-103.

Lardner, James. "Annals of Business The Sweater Trade-II" The New Yorker, January 18, 1988, pp. 57-73.

Lardner, James. "Annals of Business The Sweater Trade-I." The New Yorker, January 11, 1988, pp. 39.

Laugier, Odile. Adrienne Vittadini, Inc., New York, New York. Interview, 4 June 1990.

Prato-Premier Vision-Idea Como-Interstoff-Textitalia January 1986. New York: Here & There Inc., [1984].

Presentations des Modes en Couture Printemps. Paris: Societe Des Nouveautes Textiles, [1959].

Riley, Robert. "The Design Laboratory." The Brooklyn Museum Annual VII (1965-1966):100-117.

Rorvig, Dean. "Fashion Trend Forecasting: Prophesizing Apparel Color and Fashion, or What You Will be Wearing Next Season." Ars Textrina 11 (1989):25-51.

Soieries Imprimees No. 3. Paris: Textiles-Paris-Echos, [1955].

U.S. Customs Service, Treasury. "Textile and Textile Products." 19 Customs Service Regulations, 1 April 1989, sec. 12.130-131.

U.S. Federal Trade Commission. Rules and Regulations Under The Textile Fiber Products Identification Act. Effective 3 March 1960 As Amended 9 July 1986.

U.S. Federal Trade Commission. Rules and Regulations Under The Wool Products Labeling Act Of 1939. Effective 15 July 1941 As Amended 17 April 1985.

U.S. President. Proclamation. "Country of Origin Rules Regarding Imported Textiles and Textile Products." Federal Register 55, no. 41, 1 March 1990, 7303-6.

White, D.J. Fabric and Colour Reports. New York: Mademoiselle, [Fall/Winter 1972-73-Fall/Winter '89/90].

Women's Wear Daily, January 1988- August 1990.

Woollens Yarn Dyed No. 12. Paris: Bilbille & Co., [1965].