Batik, ja, batik: Wiener Werkstätte Batik from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Cotsen Textile Traces Collections

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In 1919, the Viennese cultural critic Adolf Loos addressed a newspaper column to the “ninety percent” of female artists who “call themselves that because they can batik.” Bemoaning shop windows filled with batik cloths and neckties, Loos stated: “To the modern human being…batik [is] an abomination.” Derisively likening the skill required of a batik artist to “drop[ing] a May bug into an inkwell and then let[ting] it crawl around on a prettily dyed, magnificent piece of…pongée silk,” Loos advised practitioners to seek a dry cleaner to “fix” their dye work by erasing it. “The danger is great,” he went on; “that all women will discover the calling to be a batik artist…and so will be withdrawn from economic work.”¹ Glaring hyperbole aside, Loos’s statements nevertheless speak to the batik technique’s prevalence in Vienna.

A craze for batik swept through Europe’s fashionable and artistic centers in the first quarter of the twentieth century, where it was used across the decorative arts in lampshades, screens, furnishings, and book covers. Batik dyeing requires skillful artistry in combination with fine craftsmanship, which appealed to creatives of the period advocating for a synthesis of the fine and applied arts. This total artwork aesthetic philosophy held particular resonance in Austria, where it was known as Gesamtkunstwerk.

Viennese batik production of the period is well documented, notably in the work of Elsa Stubchen-Kirchner, whose textiles were published in European arts journals such as The International Studio and exhibited in Vienna’s Art and Industry Museum. Contrary to Loos’s claim, batik was first practiced in Europe by male artists in the Netherlands, although within Vienna’s arts academies, the technique was studied by predominantly female students, who, confined to working in textile crafts,² may have appreciated batik’s painterly quality.

Loos’s criticism of batik as a primitive, female expression aligns with his public denunciations of the “decorative” aesthetic³ of Vienna’s foremost Arts and Crafts practitioners: the Wiener Werkstätte. Examining objects housed by two Los Angeles collections, this paper considers whether the Workshop adopted the Javanese handicraft technique in its pursuit of a total work of art. The Costume and Textiles collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) contains two silk batik-patterned blouses; and the Cotsen Textile Traces Collection holds five batik-patterned fragments. All are attributed to the Wiener Werkstätte; a “productive cooperative

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² For more on female students in Vienna, see: Megan Marie Brandow-Faller, “An Art of Their Own: Reinventing Frauenkunst in the Female Academies and Artist Leagues of Late-Imperial and First Republic Austria, 1900-1930,” (PhD. diss., Georgetown University, 2010).
of artisans established in 1903 by Josef Hoffman and Kolomon Moser. One LACMA blouse, M.2000.77.2, claims a Wiener Werkstätte fashion department label.5

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5 See Angela Völker, Wiener mode + modefotografie: die modeabteilung der Wiener Werkstätte 1911-1932, katalog des Österreichischen Museums für Angewandte Kunst (München: Verlag Schneider-Henn, 1984), 64 Fig. 80.
Investigating this premise required first tracing how a unique confluence of technology, design reform, exhibitions and commerce brought a Javanese textile tradition to Vienna. Originating from Indonesia- a colony from 1800-1949 then called the Dutch East Indies- batik was not initially valued for its artistry or cultural significance; rather, the Dutch first brought batik to Europe as souvenirs and gifts. The Dutch textile industry viewed the East Indies batik market as an opportunity for enterprise, exporting plain-weave cotton to Java and importing authentic batik samples in an attempt to perfect wax-print imitations.6

A number of these imported batik samples were given to the Dutch Society for the Advancement of Industry and used in founding the collection of the world’s first Colonial Museum in Haarlem in 1864. The Museum’s opening coincided with Europe’s widespread embrace of ethnography, and within the Netherlands, a higher regard for the material culture of the Dutch East Indies. Simultaneously, the burgeoning Arts and Crafts movement, characterized by an appreciation of handcraft over industrial production, contributed to admiration for batik dyeing. Following a popular batik display at the International and Colonial Exhibition in Amsterdam in 1882, the Haarlem Museum’s collection grew along with the public’s interest in wax-resist dyeing.

Javanese batik production had been revolutionized in the mid-nineteenth century by the invention of the *cap*, a copper stamp used to print wax design repeats on cloth. The tool eliminated the hours of hand wax-drawing required when using the wax pen, or *canting*, and this increased production speed allowed Java-based entrepreneurs to establish the first batik workshops. Despite- or perhaps because of- their own ineffective attempts to mass-produce batik, the invention of the *cap* motivated Dutch colonists to assume a new role preserving, rather than mechanizing, the traditional batik dyeing process. Women’s groups especially became interested in the colony’s culture and artisans, and in 1898, a national exhibition of women’s labor included a reproduction colonial village with demonstrations of Javanese women performing batik dyeing. The East and West Society founded the following year continued this dialogue between Dutch and colonial art, and in 1902 the group capitalized on interest generated by the exhibition by opening a batik supply shop in The Hague.7

In the Netherlands, the European vogue for Orientalism was filtered through a uniquely Javanese lens. The first Dutch artist to become interested in batik was C. A. Lion Cachet, who encountered the Haarlem Colonial Museum’s collection in 1893; by 1900 interest was so great that the Museum’s Colonial Laboratory appointed Herman Baanders to spearhead a program developing a batik method suited for Dutch use.8

As European aniline dyes of the period were not colorfast, and the natural dyes available to the European market worked best only at temperatures that would melt a wax resist, Baanders aimed to produce high quality cold-process natural dyes. German aniline dye factories, recognizing market potential, provided the Laboratory with free samples for testing by the program’s second year, but alizarin dyes were recommended until cold-process aniline dyes became a viable option.

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8 For details of Baanders’s method: Van Hout, *Batik Drawn in Wax*, 111.
The value of Javanese batik is conferred in part by the time and labor invested in its production, but a less labor intensive method was desired for European use: In place of beeswax, the laboratory proposed using “Japanese wax” and recipes of resin and tallow to create a resist heavy enough to permeate the textile, thus eliminating the time consuming step of waxing each side of cloth. In true batik, after patterns were drawn in wax, the cloth would be dyed beginning with the darkest color, usually indigo. Those portions would then be waxed over, and wax carefully removed from areas to be dyed the second deepest color, and so on, working the dye from dark to light. Baanders reversed this method, working from light to dark; re-waxing between each color, then finally removing the resist all at once by washing in gasoline.

This so-called Haarlem method was promoted by the Museum, which offered visitors free instruction manuals and sold cantings in its shop. Subsequently published Western batik manuals describe evolutions such as metal cantings, wax pencils, and paintbrushes for applying wax. Many advised learning batik dyeing on habotai or chiffon and even Loos associated batik with pongee: Fine silk, like the material used in the Los Angeles pieces, easily accepted the resist and produced more colorfast results using cool dye baths than cotton.

Silk velvet was another popular fabric for Western batik, and used to great effect by French artist Marguerite Pangon, who studied at the Haarlem Laboratory in 1904 and later established a batik atelier in Paris. Velvet required steaming and brushing to raise the nap after removing the resist, which an artist might choose to have professionally done by a dry cleaner’s—and is perhaps why Adolf Loos erroneously believed “chemical cleaners” could remove batik dyeing from fabric. European batik diverged further from Javanese batik in that, where cracks were seen as an error and batik dyers worked to avoid cracked wax in Java, in Europe, crackle as a motif became synonymous with the technique itself. In this regard, the Los Angeles pieces, all of which exhibit a dominant crackle motif, are exemplary samples of European batik.

Dutch batiks were first exhibited outside the Netherlands at the Paris International Exposition in 1900, and quickly became a fixture of international exhibitions and publications that influenced and promoted the Wiener Werkstätte, some of which include: a display at the International Modern Art Exhibition in Turin in 1902, reviewed by Walter Crane in Art Journal; a 1905 feature on Dutch batik artist Chris Lebeau in Art et Décoration; and an exhibition of The East and West Society’s batiks at the International Exhibition in Milan in 1906. The city of Brussels sent an artist in official capacity to Haarlem to study batik in 1905, then hosted batik displays and demonstrations at the General International Exhibition in 1910.

The fluid, graphic line quality of batik appealed to artists involved in Nieuwe Kunst, or Dutch Art Nouveau. The Javanese-born, Netherlands-based Jan Toorop, whose work was influential for the Viennese painter Gustav Klimt, became well-known for his 1895 Delft Salad Oil advertisement depicting women in batik-patterned reform dresses. The ad was so widely associated with Art Nouveau that the movement’s formal conventions were referred to as the “Salad Oil Style” in the

9 Van Hout, Batik Drawn in Wax, 113.
11 See: Les Batiks de Madame Pangon, WolfsonianFIU, XC1991.48
12 Adolf Loos, Trotzdem: 1900-1930.
Netherlands and in Indonesia, where stylized irises and whiplash curves were incorporated in fashionable batiks intended for the *Indische* market.\textsuperscript{14}

Dutch artist Johan Thorn Prikker, who singularly used batik stencils to create serialized prints, first experimented with batik while living in the Brussels home of Henry Van de Velde in 1896. Both artists belonged to The Arts and Crafts Gallery in The Hague, whose professional batik studio executed Prikker’s prints. With ties to Charles Ashbee’s Guild of Handicraft and Siegfried Bing’s *Salon de L’Art Nouveau* in Paris— which exhibited Prikker and Van de Velde’s batik chair— the Gallery was influential in promoting batik to artists outside the Netherlands.

As Art Nouveau advanced the Arts and Crafts mandate to level the divide between fine and decorative art, clothing design was propelled into the domain of artists. The intrinsic link of these artistic styles with the Dress Reform movement was elemental to batik’s spread from Java to Haarlem to Vienna.

A key hub in this distribution was Krefeld, Germany, a silk-weaving center home to the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum. In 1900, the Museum’s first director, Friedrich Deneken, curated an exhibit bringing together *Reformkleid*, which advocated health in women’s clothing but was criticized for lacking beauty, with artist-designed *Kunstlerkleid*, a reform style that aimed to create garments as functional as they were beautiful and modern. Henry Van de Velde exhibited harmonious total environments created by designing coordinated garments and interiors; his success in Krefeld led to a lecture circuit on women’s dress that traveled to Vienna, where newspapers widely reported on his ideas.\textsuperscript{15} He went on to teach batik in Weimar, while his collaborator Johan Thorn Prikker was recruited to teach batik in Krefeld’s applied arts school.

An earlier exhibit of art from the Netherlands shown at Krefeld was so successful that in 1906 Deneken programmed the first exhibition of Dutch East Indies art in Germany, with a lecture on batik by a Haarlem Laboratory chemist. The Laboratory had provided translated batik instruction pamphlets at every exhibit of their work since 1901; the German-language manuals dispensed in Krefeld surely contributed to spreading the technique in Germany and Austria.

Leading dress reform advocate Anna Muthesius was also instrumental in transmitting batik from Krefeld to Vienna. In 1903, she presented her lecture “Personalized Dress for Women,”—a subject similarly explored by Josef Hoffmann in his 1898 article “The Individual Dress” — to the Krefeld Chamber of Commerce.\textsuperscript{16} The following year, Muthesius wore a batik-printed reform dress\textsuperscript{17} on the cover of *Jugend*, No. 33, the widely influential publication whose title coined *Jugendstil*, the term for German and Austrian Art Nouveau. Her portrait was painted by the Director of the Glasgow School of Art, Francis Newbery, whose student Charles Rennie Mackintosh was an important Wiener Werkstätte collaborator.

\textsuperscript{14} Ruth Barnes, *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles: The Mary Hunt Kahlenberg Collection* (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2010), 182.


It was Mackintosh who encouraged Fritz Waerndorfer to fund a Viennese design collective based on British Arts and Crafts models like the Glasgow School and Charles Ashbee’s Guild of Handicraft, and the Vienna Workshop was founded by Josef Hoffman and Kolomon Moser in 1903. The founders were all affiliated with the Vienna Secession, and likewise Gustav Klimt, President of the Secession, frequently designed for the Workshop. The founders had developed a relationship with Charles Rennie Mackintosh when he participated in the Eighth Secession Exhibition, and he even designed the Workshop’s first logo.

Hoffman, Moser, and Klimt were concerned, like Henry Van de Velde, with designing environments down to clothing. All had designed reform-style dresses prior to the launch of the Wiener Werkstätte, so clothing and fabric design was a natural extension of their vision for the firm, and the fashion division was officially licensed in 1911.

In a review of the fashion division for *Wiener Allgemeinen Zeitung*, the Viennese fashion critic Bertha Zuckerkandl, who was also a client, referenced the Workshop’s use of batik: “It was logical that the spirit of the Klimt group should lead to the creation of the Wiener Werkstätte dress. The leading artists of Vienna have raised the frippery of fashion to a noble craft. They have even created outstanding fabrics, unique in color and ornamentation, for their original designs. They have utterly changed the concept of accessories through… batik sashes...These dresses, coats, sashes and hats work because they are decorative distillations of an idea of our time.”

Under the direction of Edward Wimmer-Wisgrill, who was touted as the “Poiret of Vienna,” the fashion division’s silhouettes became more Parisian than reform. The renowned French couturier Paul Poiret was himself an admirer of Viennese design; and while touring his fashion show through the city in 1913, Bertha Zuckerkandl made the fateful introduction between Poiret and the Wiener Werkstätte. Poiret was inspired to purchase yards of Wiener Werkstätte fabrics to use in his own clothing designs, and designed the Atelier Martine after the Workshop’s model.

The reciprocal influence between Poiret and the Wiener Werkstätte is especially noticeable in Otto Lendecke’s illustrations. A former designer for Poiret, Lendecke began contributing work to the Wiener Werkstätte while living in Paris in 1911. His 1912 illustrated postcards for the Workshop depict fashions with remarkably similar silhouettes and surface patterns to a Poiret coat titled *Battick*, which was photographed by Edward Steichen for *Art et Décoration* in 1911 and illustrated by George Barbier on the cover of *Les Modes* in 1912. The coat was probably produced using true wax-resist dyeing: from 1910-1912, Poiret had employed the German batik artist Erica von Scheel, who had studied the method under Henry van de Velde. Lendecke, by

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extension, may have become familiar with batik in Paris through Poiret or batik artists like Madame Pangon, and certainly could have been exposed to Dutch and Javanese batik when he organized a Wiener Werkstätte exhibition in Amsterdam in 1917.

Poiret’s signature Orientalism pervades Wiener Werkstätte designs, and certain works suggest a distinctly Javanese influence: The Workshop’s textile division produced patterns like Lotte Fromel-Fochler’s Sumatra and Julius Zimpel’s Batavia, which were named respectively after an island and the capital city of the Dutch East Indies. Small scale, geometric prints used in fashion division ensembles23 and Kolo Moser’s 1901 graphic illustration for Ver Sacrum recall batik borders and fields.24

Richard Teschner was perhaps the Workshop member most directly influenced by Javanese art. He began collecting wayang golek puppets while honeymooning in the Netherlands, and upon returning to Vienna, put on Javanese-style performances for audiences including his Wiener Werkstätte collaborators. By 1912, Teschner was creating original stories and rod-puppets of his own design. In place of traditional batik garments, Teschner used remnants given to him by the Viennese fashion designer Emilie Flöge to costume fifteen puppets in nine different Wiener Werkstätte prints.25

An American Dry Goods Economist article published in 1914 similarly testifies to a direct interchange of Viennese and Javanese design. Under the headline “Vienna Invades Paris,” staff correspondence from Paris on December 22, 1913 reports: “The art of hand-printing is being brought to a state of perfection by the Wiener Werkstätte. Besides the use of block-printing, the concern has revived the ancient Javanese art known as batik, a process of color-printing under which as each color is put on the fabric it is protected by a coating of wax. As the wax sheets crack and distribute spider’s web-like markings, no two designs ever come out exactly the same.”

The Economist’s description of crackle could be applied to all but one of the Los Angeles pieces, and the article’s distinction between the Workshop’s block-printed and wax-resist dyed textiles is significant: While the fashion division did make use of textile-division block prints in some garments, the two departments operated separately, and the fashion division incorporated textiles from sources other than just the textile division. Whereas block-prints were mass produced, the fashion division was painstakingly dedicated to handcraft—one reason its designs were so exclusive and expensive. In designing bespoke garments as individual as their wearer, the inherent variability of batik dyeing might have been appealing.

There is no question that the Workshop would have been familiar with batik. As members of the German Werkbund, along with Anna Muthesius and Henry Van de Velde, the Workshop participated in the Werkbund’s 1914 Cologne exhibition where Elsa Stubchen-Kirchner displayed batik. Kirchner’s batiks and textiles of the Wiener Werkstätte were again associated in the reviews praising Austrian architecture and decoration in the 1913 and 1914 editions of Studio Yearbook of Decorative Art.

23 Angela Völker, Textiles of the Wiener Werkstätte, 1910-1932 (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 34, fig. 48.
Still, due to the incomplete nature of the fashion division archive, it remains unknown if the Workshop engaged in actually producing wax-resist dyed cloth, or simply executed garments using batik made outside the firm. It is plausible that one of the many Viennese women derided by Loos for practicing batik commissioned a Wiener Werkstätte garment to be made of her own batik design, which would account for any labels, or that any number of the Workshop’s female artists might have studied batik while enrolled in Vienna’s Arts and Crafts school. The similarity between a design for a textile by Maria Likarz-Strauss26 and a pair of fragments from the Cotsen Collection27 raises the question of whether printed Workshop textiles might have been overdyed with crackle; the geometric blue and brown pattern repeat on LACMA blouse M.2000.77.2 may have been printed prior to being covered in resist and dyed to achieve an overall crackle effect.

In 1920, the New York Tribune announced: “The Wiener Werkstätte was responsible for many new things long since tabulated as great success…Batik printing owes its revival entirely to the studio workers in Vienna…In Vienna, this organization has two retail stops, one on the Graben…and on the Kärntnerstrasses an exclusive dressmaking, blouse and millinery shop, at which place they also sell their own specially dyed and printed fabrics. Their printed goods include hand-blocked patterns on silk and linen, special new designs in Batik, as well as a series of hand-painted fabrics…” The Wiener Werkstätte established a blouse department in 1914,28 and international fashion magazines confirm that blouses were the height of style in the nineteen-teens, which may account for why LACMA’s blouses were collected as separates rather than ensemble components.29

In addition, the Los Angeles pieces are stylistically similar to Workshop designs: A photograph from a 1913 Wiener Werkstätte fashion show in Amsterdam,30 depicts a jacket with an abstract pattern similar to LACMA blouse M.2000.77.1; while a fashion feature from American Vogue dated October 1, 1913 attributes the Workshop’s “originality and exclusiveness” to “special fabrics,” like a “vivid green coat figured large in a Batik design in black and orange.”31 The same colorful description could be applied to the Cotsen Collection’s medallion-like batik fragments,32 which are of a similar scale to motifs seen on the coat’s peplum.

A Vogue article from May 15, 1913, “Vienna Sponsors a New Mode in Decorative Art,” describes a Wiener Werkstätte interior in which ceiling shades were produced by the “Batik process- a method by which one can obtain any color or design to harmonize with the room scheme.” Whether the Wiener Werkstätte itself produced batik dyeing, or if history has attributed Viennese batik to the Workshop because each was so integral to the city’s artistic zeitgeist, to implement batik in interior decoration as well as fashion design indeed exemplifies a total work of art.

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28 Angela Völker, Wiener mode + modefotografie, 83.
29 According to the dealer through whom LACMA acquired the batik blouses, both were previously owned by a Viennese singer who wished to remain anonymous. Author’s personal correspondence, 2016.
30 Wiener Werkstätte 1913 Fashion Show, Het Leven magazine.
http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=urn:gvn:SFA03:SFA022009369
31 Vogue, October 1, 1913. p. 50
32 Textile Fragments, Cotsen Textile Traces Collection, T-0193.278-.280.
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Brandow-Faller, Megan Marie. “An Art of Their Own: Reinventing Frauenkunst in the Female Academies and Artist Leagues of Late-Imperial and First Republic Austria, 1900-1930.” PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2010.


