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DESIGN

"SIENA"

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MADE IN FINLAND

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AMERICAN SCENE BLOCK-PRINTED COTTON RUTH REEVES for W. & J. SLOANE

American (New York), 1930

Ruth Reeves (1892–1966), one of the United States’ most acclaimed textile designers, is best known for her adaptations of ancient and non-Western ornament onto fabrics that are palpably modern. Reeves’s career launched in the teens and was shaped by her connection to M. D. C. Crawford, an editor at *Women’s Wear Daily* with a keen interest in using museum collections to inspire design. Her gleaning of motifs from artifacts intensified into the mid-1930s, especially after traveling to Guatemala as a Carnegie Fellow in 1934. However, for a period of time, Reeves found herself experimenting with radically different subject matter rooted in contemporary U.S. culture.

In 1930, Reeves produced ten prints by contract for W. & J. Sloane, a U.S. furnishings purveyor founded in 1843. This series transformed the spirit of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conversational fabrics (such as toiles de Jouy) into reflections of modernity. Sloane presented an exhibition of Reeves’s work in 1930. Concurrently, the *Third International Exhibition of Contemporary Industrial Art*, held at multiple museum venues from October 1930 to April 1931, also featured Reeves’s textiles for Sloane. Organized by the American Federation of the Arts, this exhibition focused on metalwork and cotton textiles; the overwhelming critical consensus was Reeves’s works constituted a triumph of national style. Sloane was praised for elevating all-too-often obscured textile designers to a visible position and allowing Reeves free rein. In her adventurous approach, Reeves was applauded for bucking conservatism and allowing personality to shine through.

American Scene was much discussed in the press, but Sloane’s *Exhibition of Contemporary Textiles* catalogue, from December 1930, described it best: “This pictorial design is a cross between a Persian primitive painting and a mediaeval tapestry. It portrays modern country life in America, with . . . tennis, swimming, gardening, building houses, chess games . . . and children at play.” Two main scenes of routine, homey leisure provide anchor points for an exactly orchestrated mélange of vignettes: in one, women are depicted mending and reading, seated adjacent to men at a chessboard. In the other, a large family gathers around a dining table with boisterous children, a dog clamoring for attention, and a wistful woman (rumored to be Reeves) in repose with a petite Siamese cat in her lap. On the peripheries, swimmers cavort in a rippling pond; chic female spectators, befurred and parasoled, watch a vigorous tennis match; laborers build a home; and painters at canvases, observing a reclining nude, depict an art class in progress. Angled elements such as the tennis net, roof beams, and snippets of flooring add structure to the dense pattern, pointing back to the domestic interiors. When the pattern is matched along the selvages, tennis players appear next to swimmers, and a woman cradling her infant while gathering flowers stands nearby the house in progress. Patinated colors—antique gold, chalky blue, rich tobacco brown, fawn beige, and a mellow, rose-tinged terracotta—enrich this ripe cross-section of quotidian pleasures. The Sloane catalogue continued: “Printed on homespun, the pattern was planned for curtains in a living room. One could also use it—like petitpoint to cover contemporary versions of Queen Anne chairs and deep, overstuffed divans. A single repeat provides an interesting wall panel.” The notion of blending *American Scene* successfully with bygone furniture styles—even used in lieu of a wall hanging—underscores the affinity of modern, pictorial storytelling with traditional appeal.

In the January 1931 “Decorative Textiles by Ruth Reeves” article in *American Magazine of Art*, author-critic Stark Young distilled Reeves’s aesthetic choices as “sincere and alive,” noting the genuineness and solidity of her designs “make them so . . . satisfying. They would fit perfectly into decorative schemes in many styles and periods, and would often relieve and freshen the whole effect. . . . the old textile art is thus brilliantly carried forward. Such designing is neither restless nor flat, not stale and not loud or trivial. In American textiles, these designs are the finest that I have ever seen.” Despite the accolades, Sloane did not agree, expressing disappointment in themes and fabric choices, and considered the partnership unsuccessful. Yet Reeves’s unswerving vision—matched by precision in applying graphic principles—withstands the test of time.

Panels of *American Scene* are found in the collections of the Yale University Art Gallery (1995.49.7); the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2007.42); and the Victoria & Albert Museum (CIRC.265-1932 and CIRC.265A-1932).

67¼ x 46 in.

LW

PINE TREE ROLLER-PRINTED COTTON AND RAYON BARKCLOTH ROCKWELL KENT for CHARLES BLOOM, INC.

American, 1950

It is often the perception, and sometimes fact, that “fine artists” design fabrics out of economic duress. With great warmth and enthusiasm, the correspondence between Rockwell Kent (1882–1971) and the staff of Charles Bloom, Inc. (also known as Bloomcraft) preserves evidence that he willingly chose to supply textile designs for this New York-based company, and thoroughly enjoyed every step of the process, stating in a 1950 letter to a company representative: “I have discovered that things of this sort involve a tremendous amount of work. But I like it.” *Pine Tree* is one of four Kent designs printed on cloth by Bloomcraft for their Saison print’s “Happily Married” line of coordinating furnishing fabrics; all favor motifs plucked from naturescapes, but this pattern is set apart by Kent’s tender isolation of a single motif, lavished with attention.

Kent was a jack-of-all-trades who mastered many. In the course of an adventurous, rugged life he was an architect, draftsman, and carpenter; more unusually, Kent also added explorer, author, lecturer, political activist, and dairy farmer to his resume. His artistic legacy includes paintings, prints, and illustrations; early instructional exposure to William Merritt Chase, an American impressionist painter, and to Robert Henri, pioneer of the Ashcan School of realism, certainly influenced Kent’s distinctive style of regional Americana—a brand the artist touched on in the title of his 1933 book, *Rockwellkentiana*. Kent’s interest in commercial art and design was keen, dovetailing with his personal feelings concerning domestic pleasures. Though it is not clear what motivated Kent to design fabric, the Grand Central Art Galleries, in New York, was the catalyst in connecting the artist (who was not represented by them) with Charles Bloom’s company. Letters between gallery representatives, Charles Bloom, Inc. employees, and even Bloom himself, now in the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art, document the project’s arc from the contract brokered by the gallery, to Kent’s design progress, to the ambiguous end stages of the collaboration.

Pine Tree uses the lushness of evergreen boughs to disguise the pattern’s simple, compact repeat characteristic of roller printing; as it repeats both longitudinally and laterally, bristling clumps of pine needles sway in meandering, raspy vines. Each verdant cluster—crisply rendered, needle by needle—is capped with a dainty, tasseled pine cone. In a brilliant, eye-catching device, flitting butterflies are interspersed against the pale ground like golden sequins. Bloom’s printworks translated Kent’s draftsmanship perfectly in the pantographic and etching stages of preparing the copper rollers for production. Kent was amenable to changes in his proposed designs but had stronger opinions about color schemes. While writing that he purchased “monthlies devoted to home decoration” to discern popular trends, Kent remained steadfast in cleaving to hues found on land, sea, and air, underscoring that, “the school of nature which I have attended is the common school of everyone.”

A letter dated December 16, 1950, in Kent’s papers notes the happiness he felt in putting up “the brown ‘Norway Pine’ in our living-room”; indeed, a photograph in a private collection documents Kent in his Au Sable Forks, New York, farmstead with *Pine Tree* drapes in the background. In 1951, Kent was still engaged with Bloom, working incessantly on new designs and submitting a \$3,000 invoice for two patterns in June. However, no Kent fabrics went into production after the initial release. In one of the final letters from Charles Bloom, Inc., to Kent, it is succinctly put: “Unfortunately, while these patterns are beautiful, we find they are not selling as well as we would like them to.” Kent’s controversial (and potentially off-putting) political leanings were well publicized, and starting in 1950, he was embroiled in the U.S. government’s denial to renew his passport. This may be why Bloomcraft never advertised his designs. Lack of promotion notwithstanding, Kent’s decidedly nonmodernist style may simply have been out of step with evolving consumer tastes.

A length of *Pine Tree* is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2004.678). A preliminary design informally titled *Pine Boughs and Bees* is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1976.536.29); it is one of an impressive cache of watercolor textile designs by Kent in the museum’s collection.

94 x 45 in.

LW





DJUNGEL SCREEN-PRINTED LINEN JOSEF FRANK for SVENSK TENN

Swedish, 1943–45

Among all the printed textiles produced in Sweden those designed by Josef Frank and launched by Svenskt Tenn are of foremost distinction. . . . Through their ornamental imagination, brilliant composition and coloristic harmony they cannot be surpassed . . . it is not just a matter of composition, the carefully modulated colors and the liveliness of the drawing, but above all the charisma of a great artistic personality.
—Tyra Lundgren, 1945

Trained as an architect in pre–World War I Vienna, Austrian-born Josef Frank (1885–1967) is probably best known today for his distinctive interiors in the inter- and postwar years in which printed textiles played a key role. Colorful, exuberantly patterned furnishing fabrics, dominated by botanical motifs, were integral to his conception of modern décor. In contrast to the rigid, geometric compositions and understated palette of fabrics endorsed by the Bauhaus and architects such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, intended to complement a minimalist machine aesthetic, Frank’s vibrant renderings of familiar and unusual flora and fauna provided the main source of visual interest in his white-walled rooms. In a 1934 article in *Form*, the journal of the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design, Frank argued that “the monochrome surface has an unsettling effect, the patterned surface a calming one.”

In 1925, following his seven-year tenure as professor of building construction at the Vienna Kunstgewerbeschule, Frank founded the architecture and interior design company Haus & Garten in partnership with fellow architects Oscar Wlach and Walter Sobotka. The firm’s immediate artistic and commercial success caught the attention of Estrid Ericson, who had established her own design company and retail establishment, Svenskt Tenn, a year earlier in Stockholm. In 1932, Ericson contacted Frank to solicit designs for furniture and, within a year, the architect and his wife moved to the Swedish capital. Over the next three decades, the collaboration between Frank and Ericson secured their reputations as leading figures in the Swedish Modern movement and garnered international acclaim for Svenskt Tenn.

Although Sweden became the Franks’ permanent home, they left Stockholm for New York in December 1941, after the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, and remained in the United States until 1946. The years in New York were among Frank’s most productive; between 1943 and 1945, he composed about fifty new designs for Svenskt Tenn—many of them based on native plants and animals that were new to him. *Djungel* (Jungle), however, inspired by the Indian Tree of Life motif and Indonesian batiks, illustrates the wide range of historical and geographical influences on Frank’s output, including medieval European tapestries and William Morris’s printed textiles. The tree trunk, seemingly bent with age, appears in a preparatory pencil sketch by Frank and relates to another well-known design, *Gröna Fåglar* (Green Birds) from the same period. Here, the gnarled branches sprout oversized stylized flowers, leaves, and pomegranates, while additional fanciful florals and foliage grow from a hillock at the trunk’s base. A chirping bird perched delicately on a twig and a downward swooping bird and butterfly—all the same scale—inhabit the enclosed space under the backward-reaching branch. Dense, textural filling patterns decorate the trunk, branches, and floral motifs; the positive/negative effect of the carefully balanced blue-and-white color scheme mimics wax-resist-dyed batiks. Unlike most of Frank’s vividly multicolored designs, *Djungel* was screen-printed on off-white linen in blue, purple, and light green monochromatic colorways.

Frank excelled as a designer of repeating patterns, and, although his compositions appear freeform with undulating lines and seemingly random motifs, they adhere to an overall grid structure. *Djungel* is an example of his use of semi-displacement—vertical displacement by half of the repeat. Joined together, panels of the design create a rhythmic sense of movement—as though the trees are climbing upward, releasing their bounty. Framing or pulled across a window, *Djungel* reflects Frank’s longstanding exploration of the relationship between interior and exterior space and literally blurs the boundary between house and garden.

A panel of *Djungel*, manufactured in 1952, is in the collection of the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (NMK 43/1968). Ericson used the design for an invitation card to the October 1949 exhibition marking Svenskt Tenn’s twenty-fifth anniversary. The firm relaunched the pattern in September 2011 at the exhibition *Indigo blå Djungel*.

79 x 51¾ in.

MM

PAUL LASZLO'S EUROPEAN GROUP SCREEN-PRINTED RAYON PAUL LÁSZLÓ

American (California), 1954–55

“Wake Up & Live The California Way in a New Paul Laszlo house” was the epiphany offered by a Beverly Hills real estate agent advertising this designer’s recent projects in the *Los Angeles Times* on December 26, 1948. Paul László (1900–1993) was Californian by choice or destiny, not by birth—he had dreamed of his adopted home since he was a child in Hungary. László briefly studied architecture at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste, in Stuttgart, Germany, before apprenticing with an architect in Cologne. Satisfied with his real-world experience, he established his own firm in Vienna, in 1924, but by the mid-1930s had grown increasingly wary of Nazi power. His half-Jewish heritage, a perilous vulnerability, pushed him to move to the United States, settling in Los Angeles in 1936.

California’s allure proved a strong force in László’s career trajectory. Almost as quickly as he arrived, László, as he stated a 1936 *Los Angeles Times* article, was “impressed with the latitude Hollywood provides his work.” He abandoned any plans to return to Vienna and opened new offices to meet the steady demands of Tinseltown commissions. Early clients were fellow émigrés, but soon László was designing spacious, clean-lined homes in the relaxed California Modern vein for all-American celebrities such as Cary Grant, Elizabeth Taylor, and Barbara Stanwyck. László’s commercial resume included designs for Californian shopping meccas such as Bullocks Wilshire and Ohrbach’s; Las Vegas casinos, banks, theaters, and hospitals; and even bomb shelters. He worked in a number of styles suited to specific needs, and embraced materials ranging from humble brick to stainless steel.

László earned his reputation for tempering modern sleekness with elegance and comfort, stating in *TIME* in 1952: “Warmth in luxury, he says, ‘is easy. But it is full of pitfalls. . . . Furniture must help balance a home . . . It should so blend with the wallpaper and contours of the room that it does not annoy.” László favored thoughtfulness in his choice of suppliers and his own designs. Many László interiors were enhanced by Maria Kipp’s custom weavings; his designs for manufacturers, including Rattan Stylists, Ficks Reed, and Herman Miller, commingled plush, generous proportions with simplicity and were made for mass production. Inventive, biomorphic shapes—a hallmark of “organic” modernist design—crept into László’s work as well. Amoebic handles adorn the *Treasure Chest* credenza he designed in the early 1950s for the Los Angeles-based Brown-Saltman Furniture Company, while a sculptural wall table, sinuously carved from wood with a free-form Lucite top nicknamed the *Dali Table* (ca. 1953), represents the custom-made end of László’s spectrum.

Though immersed in Californian modernism, László surely looked to Europe when developing this fabric—the selvedge states: “Paul Laszlo’s European Group.” An observer familiar with the surreal artworks by Jean (Hans) Arp or the elaborate universes painted on canvas by Joan Miró can easily discern the influence of early to mid-twentieth-century European art movements on this textile. What appears at first as a complex constellation of forms is, simply, two discrete motifs repeating diagonally and interconnected by energetic thread-like lines. Warm, sandy beige predominates, supporting an array of jewel-toned shapes offset by bark brown; shadowy pockets of neutral color impart depth and a suggestion of texture, especially the smudgy spots resembling ridged fingerprints. The intense, yet natural, desert palette tips this pattern toward California, but the unsettling, vaguely figural aspects (peering eyes and eyelash wisps) pull this abstraction back toward European inspiration.

László used this fabric (perhaps created specifically for the project) in his 1954–57 rebuild of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Genis’s Beverly Hills home, featured in the January 1955 *Architectural Digest*. As pictured in the lanai room, steps away from the pool, lengths were hung as a flowing expanse of drapery and translated into couch and armchair upholstery with a brilliant flourish: the motif outlines were quilted, adding tufted dimension to the curvilinear forms. It is unknown how many, if any, other textiles László designed for the “European Group.”

Panels of this fabric are in the collections of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum (1998-57-1) and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.2010.163). The latter was exhibited in the museum’s 2011 exhibition (and published in the companion catalogue) *California Design, 1930–1965: Living in a Modern Way*.

108 x 46 in.

LW



GOUACHE TEXTILE DESIGNS FOR BIANCHINI FÉRIER

French, ca. 1928–39

The dynamic styles of these four textile patterns, created by designers for the French firm Bianchini Férier, demonstrate the company's interest in, and promotion of, the most up-to-date looks in French modernity during the 1920s and 1930s. These striking geometrics, conveying the shift in design sensibilities that took place in the early decades of the twentieth century, were manufactured into fashionable yardage, in both silks and cottons, and in a variety of colorways, to complement the period's streamlined modes in women's frocks, men's ties, and household furnishings.

Bianchini Férier, one of the twentieth century's premier French textile manufacturers, was founded in 1888, in Lyon, by François Atuyer, Charles Bianchini, and François Férier. Over its long history, the firm produced luxury materials that were used by top couturiers as well as designers of chic interiors. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the company's output included works by numerous artists and illustrators such as Raoul Dufy, who designed for Bianchini Férier from 1912 to 1928, producing over three thousand designs; Paul Iribe; Charles Martin; and Georges Barbier; along with Robert Bonfils (1886–1972) and P. R. George, designers of two of the works illustrated here.

In these four textile designs, the fast-paced technological advances of the early twentieth century are on display, interpreted into abstract patterns. In whirls of color, strong, dynamic movement is portrayed: wheels spin in motion, points intersect in multidirections, waves roil, and circles bisect lines and rectangles. This new moderne sensibility was presented in 1925 at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, where every item on display had to reflect modern sensibilities; this historic event completely changed the look of quotidian modern life.

Robert Bonfils, one of the Exposition's organizers and designer of its iconic poster, began creating designs for Bianchini Férier in 1915. He produced the gouache design called *Variations*, which depicts cubist-inspired, segmented circles and rectilinear shapes, in about 1928. The thin-and-thick black lines of the pattern, particularly those outlining the circular shapes, provide a strong sense of movement, and the areas that are filled in a dot pattern give an impression of molecular activity. An extant printed silk version of the design uses the bold primary colors seen on the painted paper, while extant woven examples use muted, neutral tones. An example of *Variations* in the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum is a silk damask in shades of gray and off-white. In *Avant Garde by the Yard: Cutting Edge Textile Design, 1880–1930*, Otto Thieme writes of the woven silk that “although it is almost monochromatic, a great deal of its visual interest comes from skillful use of the damask weave to produce small-scale patterns that quickly are perceived as textures that both define and separate the motifs.” A February 1930 Bianchini Férier advertisement from *Art et décoration* shows the Bonfils silk as a large panel behind an armchair upholstered in a cotton by Dufy.

The design of layered points in red, white, and blue is pricked at the paper's lower edge with the name P. R. George, an illustrator and designer. Additional markings on the paper pattern provide interesting information: it is labeled *cravate*, indicating that the silk was used for men's ties. The firm of Bianchini Férier manufactured silks for ties as a means, in part, of surviving the Great Depression. Also written on the paper are the words *Cascadense soie*. During this period, words expressing ideas of motion, danger, and speed were employed in advertising campaigns to mark the shift from outdated ideas of stability to notions of streamlined modernity. *Cascadense*, meaning “stuntwoman,” was one such marketing term, used by Bianchini Férier in the 1920s to denote the daring suppleness of a fabric.

An anonymous design—also for use as tie fabric—features circles, rectangular shapes embedded with lines of varying widths, and cutout rectilinear areas, all creating a bold geometric presence. While the paper design appears in red, navy blue, and white, the design was produced, in 1939, by Bianchini Férier as a printed silk in blue, brown, and white, its impact equally strong in these alternate colors. Also from an anonymous designer, a striking pattern of dense bands of wavy lines, overlapping and rippling, in red, black, and white on paper and manufactured in blue, black, and white in a 1930 printed-silk version, reveals the ongoing attention to innovative style in textiles by firms such as Bianchini Férier.

With their commitment to talented designers and artists, the firm of Bianchini Férier was a leader in setting styles of fabrics over decades of the twentieth century. As indicated by the extensive 2001 sale of designs from the firm's archive extending from 1889 to 1964, which included these four patterns, Bianchini Férier transformed how modern men and women both dressed and decorated their homes.







Above: French, ca. 1939. 15 x 10 in.

A printed silk example of this design is in the collection of the Design Library, London. The silk is illustrated in Peter Koepke, *Patterns: Inside the Design Library* (2016), p. 143.

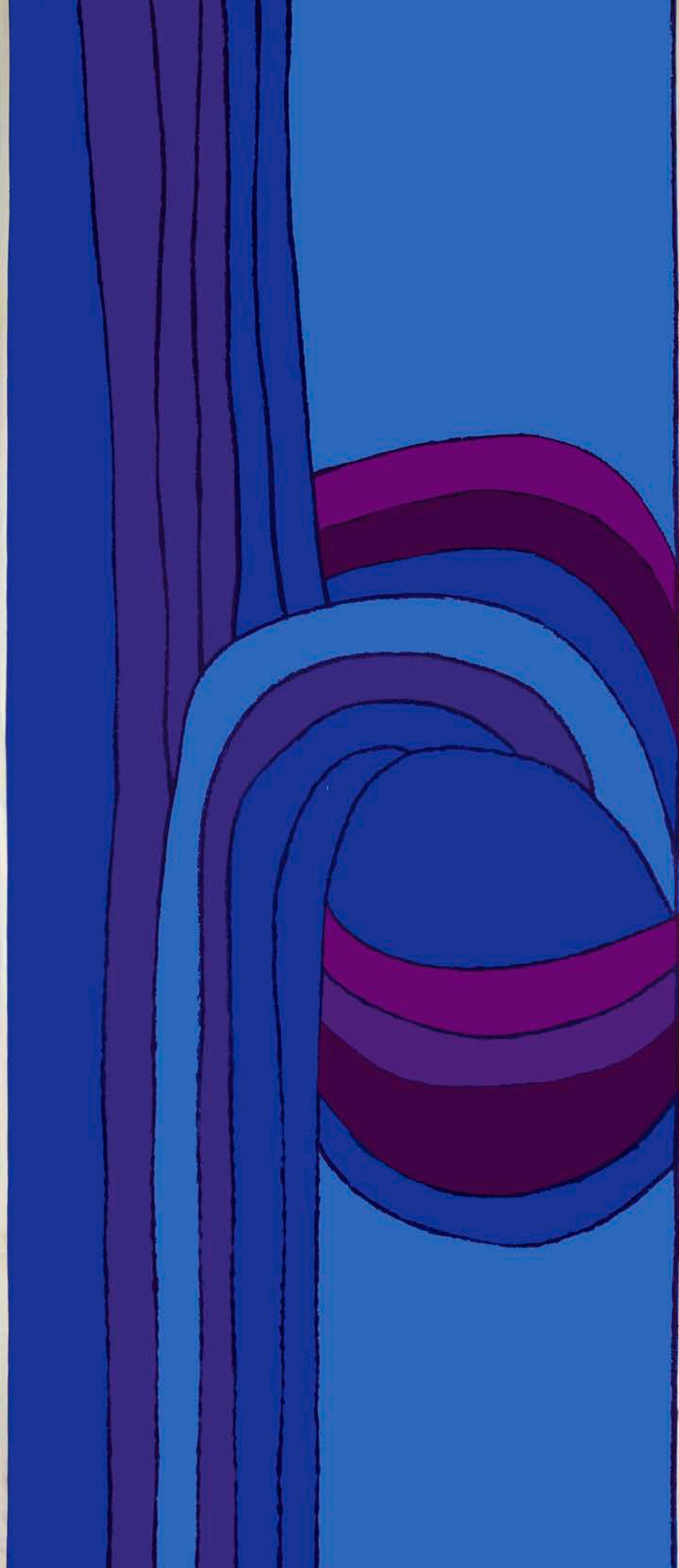
Opposite top: P. R. George, French, ca. 1930. 19½ x 15½ in.

Opposite bottom: French, 1930. 15 x 11¾ in. A printed silk example of this design is in the collection of the Design Library, London.

Previous: *Variations*, Robert Bonfils, French, ca. 1928. 12 x 10 in.

Woven silk lengths of *Variations* are in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris (44018); the Cincinnati Art Museum (1929.199); and the Victoria & Albert Museum (T.6-1932); a jacquard-woven cotton version is in the Victoria & Albert Museum (CIRC.165-1932); and a printed silk version of the design is in the collection of the Design Library, London. The silk is illustrated in *Paris 1929* (1929), pl. 41 and Otto Thieme, *Avant Garde by the Yard: Cutting Edge Textile Design, 1880–1930* (1996), cover and pl. 24.

Provenance: All designs from the Bianchini Férier archive



TRAPEZE, ACADEMIE, AND ROADS SCREEN-PRINTED FABRICS LEO AND GRETL WOLLNER

Austrian (printed in Germany and the United States), 1954–72

The explosion of creativity and entrepreneurship that defined postwar textile manufacture tempted designers with name recognition and mass-market appeal. The demands of such commercialization and wide promotion, however, also came at the expense of quality—to create affordable textiles, some firms used less precise printing processes and subpar fibers.

Two designers who wholly rejected this mass-production model were the Austrian husband and wife team Leo (1925–1995) and Gretl Wollner (1920–2006). Their design ethos rested on inherent functionality and exalting handwork as fine art. As the architectural historian Eduard Sekler wrote of the couple, “For them the usability of their creations in daily life was not something unimportant but rather a natural commitment.” Weaving and experimentation were the cornerstones of their well-designed printed textiles, illustrated by Leo Wollner’s insistence that his students first use a loom. Unsurprisingly, their material grounding is attributed to Wiener Werkstätte alumni: Eduard Josef Wimmer-Wisgrill, with whom the couple studied in the 1940s, and Josef Hoffmann, under whom Leo held a residency.

Although now best recognized in their native Austria, the Wollners first garnered praise for their weavings and prints elsewhere in Europe and in the United States. Between 1951 and 1961, they won awards at all four Milan Triennali and, in 1953, received first and second prizes and honorable mention in the Fleischman International Carpet Design Competition held in the United States; the designs toured U.S. museums, bringing offers of permanent work, but the pair returned to Austria after time living the United States. One year prior, Willy Häussler, head of the textile manufacturer Pausa, in Mössingen, Germany, invited Leo Wollner to work for the firm. This relationship bore fruit for decades to come and led to Wollner’s appointment, in 1957, as professor and chair of textile design at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste, in Stuttgart. In 1958, the Wollners’ textiles were shown at the Stedelijk Museum, in Amsterdam, and Expo 58, in Brussels. Gretl’s career yielded to motherhood’s demands by this time, but she remained her husband’s most important collaborator and critic and later won honors in her own right, including the U.K.-based Carpet Trades Ltd. competition in 1966.

The Wollners cemented their fame at home with the 1959 exposition *Grete und Leo Wollner* at the Museum für angewandte Kunst, in Vienna. That year, Leo received the Prize of the City of Vienna for Fine Arts in the applied arts category. The Wollners also designed the stage curtain for the Großes Festspielhaus, in Salzburg, spurring a string of civic commissions throughout Austria and Germany over the next decades. Leo headed the textile design department at the Staatliche Akademie until 1991, and they maintained a studio and showroom in Vienna into the mid-1990s.

Trapeze is a testament to the Wollners’ early international success. While in the United States in 1953, they conceived this graphic pattern of triangles in emerald and acidic yellow (called “bitter green” in advertisements) with black hatching for Estelle and Erwine Laverne. Part of Laverne’s “Contempora Series” in 1954, *Trapeze* was produced on linen (as here), cotton, wallpaper, and fiberglass, the latter revealing the designers’ and manufacturer’s shared interest in novel materials. A purple and black version in the Wollners’ private archive in Vienna may show the original design.

While *Trapeze* was a singular collaboration with Laverne Originals, Inc., *Academie* and *Roads* speak to the Wollners’ decades-long alliance with, and confidence in, Pausa as leaders in high-quality printing. Produced around 1958, *Academie*, which depicts alternating bands of irregular vertical stripes and dense ovals on cotton, was likely a product of Wollner’s praxis-based instruction using the Pausa facility as classroom; the selvedge notes “Team Professor Wollner.”

Having won awards across Europe during the 1960s, the Wollners were approached in 1970 by Knoll International. This led to the award-winning fabric *Sling* (1971), but their most celebrated designs were the “Three Meter Prints” that premiered in Knoll showrooms worldwide in 1972. The couple developed a technique for producing floor-to-ceiling, mural-like compositions whose size and complexity challenged even Pausa’s veteran printers. These nonrepeating designs utilized screens so large that they required four people to maneuver and extra-wide printing tables. *Roads*’s looping bands resembling postwar highways are a virtuoso work comprising seven screens measuring 112 inches.

These three textiles reflect the continued influence of high Viennese craft traditions and experimentation on the Wollners’ prodigious oeuvre as well as their fluency with international design vocabularies. Above all, they are proof that the Wollners’ insertion in twentieth-century design histories has been long overdue.



Trapeze, Leo and Gretl Wollner for Laverne Originals, Inc., ca. 1954. 109 x 47 in.



Academie, Leo Wollner, probably printed by Pausa AG, ca. 1958. 111½ x 48½ in.



Rugged Square, Laverne Originals, Inc., 1950. 82 x 50½ in.

**RUGGED SQUARE AND IMPROMPTU
SCREEN-PRINTED FABRICS
LAVERNE ORIGINALS, INC.**

American (New York), 1950 and 1958

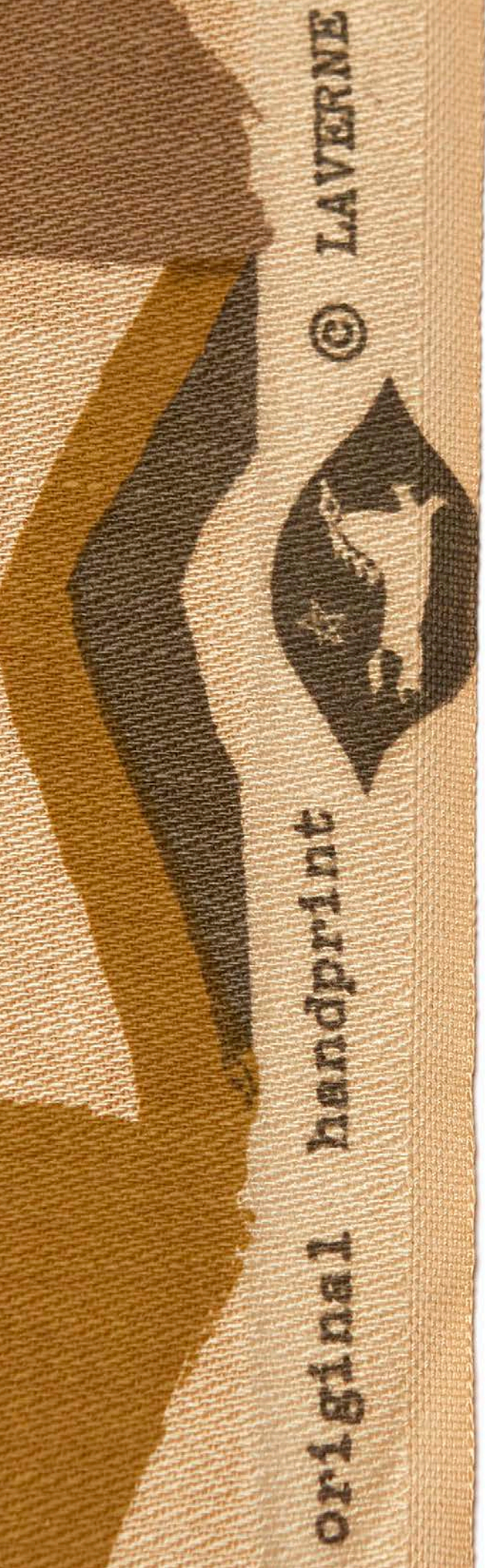
In a repertoire that veered easily between austere and flamboyant, Estelle and Erwine Laverne partnered in two formidable enterprises: in a husband-and-wife, bohemian lifestyle, and in an exceptionally successful design firm that garnered museum awards and advanced modernist interiors. The Lavernes' furnishings business was nascent in 1934, the year they married and started a wallpaper company (with the help of Erwine's brother Louis). Wall treatments would always be a mainstay of their commerce, but fabrics—the ingredient essential to new architectural styles emphasizing glass “window walls”—served as the ultimate canvases for this duo, fusing artistry with function. These two textiles, designed almost a decade apart, exemplify the painterly leanings Laverne Originals was praised for internationally.

Both Estelle (1915–1997, née Lester) and Erwine (1909–2003), whose family name, Levine, had been anglicized, came from artistic Russian émigré families that settled in New York. The couple met in 1932 at the Art Students League; their collective experience there, which lasted over decades, resulted in consistent explorations of abstract and figural vocabularies, whether on canvases, walls, or furniture. Their fledgling business catapulted to new heights in 1942 when Erwine boldly intimated to a Macy's department store executive that he could—and would—design a better array of placemats than what he'd come to purchase. The initial success of his mats led to coordinating fabrics and wallpapers, and soon the couple incorporated Laverne Originals. Advertising in *Arts & Architecture* in May 1950, the company is described as driven by “artists' concepts uninhibited by ‘what the public will buy’ approach.” No slaves to tradition, the Lavernes were innovators, introducing an aluminum-backed, perforated cloth called *Lavernite* and marvelous crystalline chairs, always respecting human needs in interior spaces. While some room schemes could handle explosive patterns (such as those designed for them by Alexander Calder), others called for subtle patterns such as *Rugged Square* and *Impromptu*.

With vibrant blood red on a tan ground, *Rugged Square* successfully preserves the artists' hand: what could be a monotonous repetition of horizontal stripes and boxy motifs is vivified by the brush-wrought look of each square, the slightly off-kilter alignment of lines, and the print's uneven texture. This unevenness is not misprinting—it is carefully calculated to look imperfect, akin to the Western interpretation of Indonesian wax-resist-dyed batiks. Demure yet forceful, *Rugged Square* was on-trend at its introduction, in 1948, filling the perceived need for small, dimensional repeating motifs; the pattern was lauded for its ability to look just as good when used sideways. When the first *Laverne Originals Furniture and Textiles Catalogue* was printed, in 1950, *Rugged Square* was classified in the “Contempora Series,” many of which were created by graphic and industrial designers now firmly enshrined in the modernism pantheon, including Alvin Lustig, Ray Komei, and Juliet and Gyorgy Kepes. In this particular catalogue, *Rugged Square* is described as a one-color horizontal print with a “rough massive effect”; it was also available as a wallpaper and “sculptured weave.” By 1961, the Laverne catalogue had expanded options for *Rugged Square*, offering an additional scale designated “jumbo.” This colorway suggests it is an early printing, as the January 1961 catalogue does not indicate red as an option;

*“Rugged
Square”*





the fine, plain-weave ground also aligns with fabrics the couple used before branching out into more experimental choices.

In contrast to the reductive simplicity of *Rugged Square*, *Impromptu* is built on a different foundation. Whereas many Laverne patterns were printed in one, two, or three colors (adhering to Estelle's viewpoint on using colors sparingly and proportionally in interior schemes), *Impromptu*, offered in various colorways, features a melody of either four or five colors arranged in a vigorous scherzo of triangles, diamonds, and angular hourglass forms on a broken-twill fabric of cupro, a rayon fiber commonly known as Bemberg. The rhythmic impression is aided by deliberate fluctuations of contrasting, subdued colors described in the 1961 catalogue as "dark gray, taupe, beige, and mustard"—the fabric's flaxen ground shines through as an essential fifth color, especially in a sprinkling of pale shapes cascading down the pattern's length. The selvedge confirms the pattern's 1958 copyright date and features a variant of the Lavernes' leaping horse-and-star logo; it also brags, "Awarded Citation of Merit American Institute of Decorators 1958."

A panel of *Rugged Square* is in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art (1948.496).

LW



Impromptu, Laverne Originals, Inc., 1958. 91 x 47 in.

STEER HORNS AND ADOBE HILLS SCREEN-PRINTED LINENS JENS RISOM for L. ANTON MAIX FABRICS, LTD.

American (New York), 1950–55

“The answer is Risom” was the famous tagline applied to Jens Risom’s eponymous design firm’s advertisements in the 1950s. The question that arises in considering these two fabrics he designed for L. Anton Maix in the early 1950s is: What is the origin of these motifs? The definitive answer may escape us, but the answer’s kernel remains Risom.

Danish-born Risom (1916–2016) is often credited with bringing the Scandinavian look to U.S. soil. The son of a prominent architect, Risom studied at the Copenhagen School of Industrial Arts and Design (now known as the Danish Design School) in the 1930s; in 1939, just before the German invasion of Denmark, in 1940, he emigrated to New York and worked briefly as a textile designer for Dan Cooper’s firm. In a stroke of luck, Risom befriended Hans Knoll and—in the blink of an eye and despite wartime constrictions—Risom had designed fifteen pieces for Knoll’s first furniture collection. These would be the only designs Risom produced for Knoll’s firm before he was drafted into army service in 1943; he parted ways with Knoll soon after and, in 1946, launched Jens Risom, Inc., devoting himself to approachable, graceful design.

In Risom’s obituary, the *New York Times* described him as “a Dane seduced by the allure of homey Americana.” As much as his internalized Danish sensibilities were lauded, it was Risom’s conviction that modern designers in the United States develop a vernacular looking no further than its borders. On the occasion of the 1956 International Furniture Market in Chicago, Risom urged Americans to take the lead in contemporary design, declaring: “Let’s not overdo this enthusiasm for certain foreign designs. . . . Manufacturers should break away from the safe, tried and true traditional influences and make an effort to create a truly American design.” The “U.S. Modern” style—as described by the textile artist Dorothy Liebes, with Risom present, at a press breakfast for that year’s International Furniture Market—should rely on “colors and textures that find their origin in the traditions and history of our own country.”

These two Risom fabrics, created between 1950 and 1955, espouse this philosophy, and may have been sparked by his memories of a research roadtrip with Hans Knoll in 1941 that cut through the Southwest. Both patterns make effective use of two screens, one for each distinct layer. *Adobe Hills*—printed with a quirky variant of the company’s name on the selvedge, “A. Maix’s-ing Fabrics Inc.”—flows with the topographical silhouettes of mesas, their softly sloping, eroded features rendered in rust and translucent, mineral green. These horizontal strands of landscape, varied in thickness, rise and fall in overlapping intervals; occasionally, vertically disposed oval forms lasso the traversing lines together, suggesting the oblong doorways of cliff dwellings.

Steer Horns, also evocatively Western, is a contrast in abstraction and naturalism, with orderly but irregularly complete registers of the stylized titular motif in olive drab superimposed with rustling tufts of clay-toned grasses. This textile highlights a shrewd aspect of Larry Maix’s business: the modular customizability of pattern, responsive to the printer’s whim or the specifications of a client. On the selvedge, registration marks confirm the use of screens designated “1” and “3,” with a blank space where “2” might appear, indicating the omission of at least one additional screen. Indeed, a decorator’s advertisement seen in the *Akron Beacon Journal* on February 25, 1953, shows a variation of this pattern using screen 1, but not 3—instead, enlarged horns figure into the pattern, perhaps the missing second screen or possibly a fourth. Whether by coincidence or intent, the pattern’s stylized horns bear an uncanny resemblance to the profile of Risom’s 650 Series Knoll lounge chair, if the profiles were confronted.

Larry Maix was one of Hans Knoll’s first employees, which explains how he and Risom connected. They remained friends after each fell out with Knoll, leading Risom to develop a few textiles for Maix’s new firm. He also used Maix fabrics designed by Olga Lee Baughman, in variations of *Elements*, for upholstered chairs in his showroom, which was illustrated in *Art & Architecture* in September 1953.

An alternate colorway of *Adobe Hills* is in the collection of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum (1995-48-5) and is illustrated in William Hennessey, *Modern Furnishings for the Home*, vol. 2 (1956). *Steer Horns* is featured in the first Hennessey volume (1952).

LW

Opposite and p. 27: *Steer Horns*, Jens Risom, 105 x 49 in.
p. 26: *Adobe Hills*, Jens Risom, 130 x 51 in.



"STEER HORNS" by Jens Risom

ANTON L. MAIX FABRICS

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PAT. REP. 27

"STEER HORNS" by Anton Maix

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SIENA AND 14/6 SCREEN-PRINTED COTTONS ALVAR AALTO for ARTEK OY and NK TEXTILKAMMARE

Finnish (printed in Finland and Sweden), 1954

The few textile designs produced by the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898–1976) during his lifetime are proof that the union of functionality and historical reverence that was characteristic of his buildings carried over to drapery and upholstery. Most textiles made for Aalto's building projects were the work of the architect's two most important collaborators: his first wife, Aino, and his second wife, Elissa. However, *Siena* and his two designs for the NK Textilkammare, *14/6* and *14/14* (not shown), represent Aalto's only forays into this medium.

Siena was produced in 1954 by Artek Oy, the company Aalto had founded in 1935 with Aino, Nils-Gustav Hahl, and Maire Gullichsen to showcase and manufacture the couple's designs. The pattern of *Siena* is said to have been inspired by its namesake city, particularly the banded marble facade and interior columns of its fourteenth-century cathedral. Aino Aalto died of cancer in 1949, but *Siena* was an enduring reminder of the couple's personal and professional life together. Alvar Aalto had first seen the city in 1924 during their honeymoon and would return there decades later, in 1965, when the Council of Siena invited him to design an ultimately unrealized cultural center on the site of the Fortezza Medicea.

14/6 is the compositional inverse of *Siena* in its use of positive and negative space. Although lacking a conspicuously Italianate name, the design features black boxes with a striking resemblance to another Tuscan monument: Florence Cathedral and its grid-like marble facade. The effect is especially apparent in the black-and-white colorway, which Aalto also used for its sister design *14/14*. The clean, organic modernism of Aalto's buildings belies the influence of Renaissance Italy that permeates his oeuvre, with grid work and stripes at the core. In 1925, Aalto grafted the inlaid marble squares of Leon Battista Alberti's Tempietto del Santo Sepolcro onto the Workers' Club building in Jyväskylä, Finland. In the 1950s, he experimented with grids in brickwork at his summer home in Muuratsalo, Finland, and clad the facade of the Wolfsburg Cultural Center, in Germany, in bands of Carrara marble and Pamir syenite. Elissa Aalto later combined the shapes of *14/6* and *Siena* in her carpet design for the Maison Louis Carré, in Bazoches-sur-Guyonne, France.

The Stockholm department store Nordiska Kompaniet premiered *14/6* and *14/14* as part of their "Signerad Textil" (Signed Textiles) collection in 1954, the same year that Aalto's furnishings for Artek found a new audience at the store. In 1953, textile impresaria Astrid Sampe approached Aalto about a collaboration for the NK Textilkammare, Nordiska Kompaniet's fabric studio, to be manufactured by Ljungbergs Textiltryck. Aalto's compositions are geometrically precise, which founder Erik Ljungberg noted made for easy transposition onto screens during the printing process. Aalto might have played with this accuracy in his titles, which reference an incorrect number of boxes running vertically and horizontally along the design—in reality fifteen and six, rather than fourteen. Ljungbergs produced both fabrics in black on white, as well as the present version of *14/6* with a printed ground of warm saffron. The color yellow played an important role in the interiors of many of Aalto's structures, in particular the rubber flooring of the lobby and the stairwells that were meant to brighten the Paimio Sanatorium during Finland's dark winter nights.

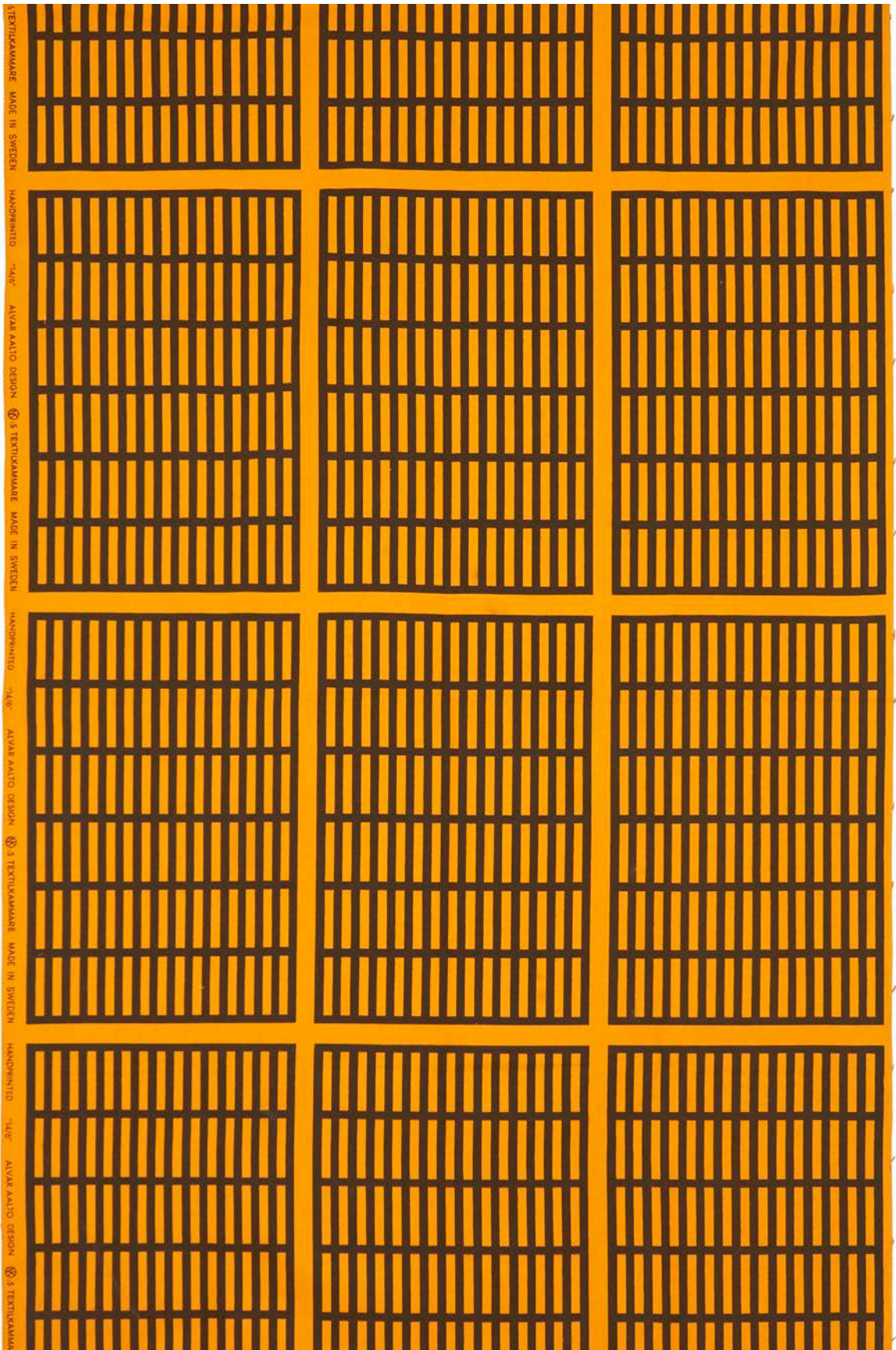
Aalto intended these fabrics to be multifunctional. Elissa Aalto wore a dress made of *Siena*, and Artek now manufactures blankets, bags, aprons, and dinnerware in their contemporary reissue of the design. Nordiska Kompaniet encouraged similarly broad uses of their textiles; Swedish fashion designer Pelle Lundgren created a day dress of *14/14* that was modeled during the fashion show at the *H55 Exhibition* in Helsingborg, Sweden, in 1955. On the dress, Aalto's grids cascade down the rounded skirt and are pieced at a forty-five-degree angle along the bodice to form diamonds accentuating the torso and small waist. Such New Look–inspired silhouettes and Albertian principles might seem incongruous; however, Aalto's humanist foundations in his design practice are epitomized in his textiles and their relationships to home, body, and the historical imagination.

Aalto's original design for *14/6* and a length in the black-and-white colorway are in the collection of the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (NMH 39/1982 and NMK 151/1979). Lengths of *Siena* are in museum collections including the Alvar Aalto-Museo, Jyväskylä; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2007.275); the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2011.1001); and Stedelijk Museum (1991.1.0277).

MDA

Opposite: *14/6*, Alvar Aalto for NK Textilkammare, 1954. 84 x 49¾ in.

Inside covers: *Siena*, Alvar Aalto for Artek Oy, 1954. 84½ x 59 in.





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DESIGN

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