

## BATIK IN AMERICA AND BRITAIN 1920-1930: THE EARLY CAREER OF MARION DORN

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WHILE Marion Dorn's output as a textile designer in the 1930s has been well documented<sup>1</sup>, detailed information on her early career is more difficult to come by. Few of her textile designs from this period survive; yet her formative years in San Francisco, New York, Paris and later London had an important influence on her stylistic approach to design and her methods of working. In particular, her introduction to textiles via batik marked a significant transition from her initial training and practice as a painter, to a highly successful career as a freelance designer of rugs, fabrics and wallpapers. This essay will examine the development of Dorn's early work as a practitioner of batik, which provided the foundation for her better-documented practice as a freelance designer.

Marion Dorn was born in San Francisco on December 25th 1896.<sup>2</sup> She studied at Stanford University, California, between c.1912 and 1916. Initially opting for academic subjects, she gradually increased the number of courses she took in the Department of Graphic Art. It is not possible to say exactly which courses she took, but amongst those available were painting, drawing, colour, handicrafts, house design and furnishing, illustration and history of art.<sup>3</sup> Dorn was considered to be a good student as evidenced by her membership of Phi Beta Kappa, given for good scholarship. In May 1916 she was awarded her BA Graphic Arts degree.

It is unclear when Dorn began designing and making textiles. *The American Art Annual* described her as an artist in 1919<sup>4</sup> however, it was her move to New York which marked the start of what was to be a long career as a textile designer. While Dorn had been studying at Stanford University she met her future husband Henry Varnum Poor, Assistant Professor of Graphic Art and a painter, with whom she shared a studio in Russian Hill. The couple were married in July 1919, and in the autumn moved to the east coast where they settled in New City, Rockland County (a few miles north of New York City). The choice of New City was to prove significant for both Dorn and Poor as at this time a small artistic community was emerging in the town and the influence of both friends and neighbours meant that the couple were to devote their time increasingly towards design activities; Poor in ceramics and Dorn in batik work. Initially the couple shared a house with the textile designer Ruth Reeves. It is likely that the close proximity of Reeves and other textile designers who lived nearby (Martha Ryther and Gilbert Rose both lived in New City) influenced Dorn's decision to begin work with fabric.

The instigation of a number of annual exhibitions and

competitions may also have been seminal in Dorn's choice of textiles as a medium. Between about 1915 and 1925 there was a great deal of encouragement by many curators to persuade young designers to use museum collections as sources of inspiration for their work; this was particularly the case in textile design. Many initiatives were taken to encourage native talent and to improve American design, providing viable competition for the ever popular European imports. In an effort to make museum collections more accessible to designers, Richard F Bach, Associate in Industrial Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, established in 1917 the Annual Exhibitions of American Industrial Art. Marion Dorn is listed as a participant in the textile division of the fifth exhibition of American Industrial Art (held at the Metropolitan Museum in 1920-21). In his writings Bach suggested that a museum should be divided into two sections, one for fine arts and one for industrial arts. He felt that the industrial arts museum should include:

workrooms and laboratories, places with proper lights for looms, for color work, for printing and so on, power driving all types of modern machinery, individual loges for craftsmen, studios for designers, class rooms, a practical library...<sup>5</sup>

M D C Crawford, Research Associate in textiles at the American Museum of Natural History, was also a vociferous advocate of the use of museum collections. In conjunction with the fashion paper, *Women's Wear*, he instigated a series of competitions which ran from 1916 to 1921, to encourage the design of fabrics inspired by historical collections. A supplementary competition 'The Albert Blum Exhibition of Hand Decorated Fabrics' provided the opportunity for entrants to submit ideas on fabric rather than paper. Crawford described the purpose of the contests:

Such designs as win prizes will be brought to the attention of people most likely to buy them. The one ground on which they will be judged will be their application to commercial purposes. The fundamental idea is to bring the artists, the textile mills, and the museum into closer touch [with] the general advancement of art and trade.<sup>6</sup>

The competitions were regarded as a way of developing a 'truly American type of industrial art'.<sup>7</sup> Among the winners listed by Crawford were Martha Ryther, Ruth Reeves and Marion Poor (Dorn).<sup>8</sup> A large number of the designs which were submitted to the contests reflected the popularity of batik in both America and Europe and it is likely that Dorn's designs were intended for this process. This is supported further by a short piece which appeared in *Women's Wear* in 1921:



Figure 1. Batik design, probably by Marion Dorn - illustrated in *Women's Wear* in March 1921.

Marion and Henry Poor and Herman Rosse have developed an old craft process of resist dyeing . . . and have applied it to the problems of modern fabric and costume decoration. It is closely analogous to batik but has a greater delicacy of drawing and greater coherence in design. Incidentally it is more economical, and can be reproduced in larger volume.<sup>9</sup>

The text was accompanied by a small drawing of a textile design (Figure 1). Although no designer is named, the piece resembles closely the batik designs which Dorn completed when she settled in England, and seems likely to have been designed by her. To date this small drawing is the only visual evidence which exists of Dorn's work before 1925, and attribution remains speculative.

As well as textiles Dorn was also engaged in graphic work during this period. She won first prize in the poster division of the Fifth Annual Women's Wear Contest, her design probably advertising the 1921 contest (which never took place).<sup>10</sup> In an interview in 1951 Dorn recounted the beginnings of her career in New York. She recalled taking a course at the American Museum of Natural History and winning a contest for foulard design, the prize for which was a three month job with a fabric house.<sup>11</sup> It was this experience which she felt launched her career as a designer and which initiated the success she was to enjoy when she settled in London.

Dorn's work in batik is a reflection of the popularity of the craft in America; it was practised by many including Pieter Mijer, Arthur J. Crisp, Marquerite Zorach and Martha Ryther.<sup>12</sup> The popularity of the process soon extended to industrial applications, as the *American Silk Journal* noted in 1919: 'Batik it is has been predicted, will have an important development in the modern printing industry'.<sup>13</sup> However, concern was expressed by some commentators that batik should not become too commercialised as this might lead to a deterioration of quality.<sup>14</sup> A reflection of the popularity of batik could be seen in August 1919 when a

comprehensive exhibition of the art was held at the new Bush Terminal Sales Building in New York.<sup>15</sup>

Batik was also enjoying popularity on the other side of the Atlantic. Dorn may have seen the batik work of Marguerite Pangon's studio and the studios of Pangon's imitators while she was living in Paris. Like many other young Americans interested in the arts, Dorn lived in Paris for a time. She arrived in the Spring of 1923 and it is thought that she probably travelled to Paris with her neighbour Ruth Reeves. What she actually did once she arrived is not known. However, Reeves knew Raoul Dufy and Fernand Leger<sup>16</sup>, and probably introduced Dorn to them. Dorn spent about six months in the city and during this period she was reacquainted with Edward McKnight Kauffer whom she had previously met when he visited New City in 1921.<sup>17</sup>

It is not surprising that Dorn should choose to continue to design and produce batiks when she settled in London with Edward McKnight Kauffer in 1923. Batik equipment was inexpensive and quite easy to come by as the craft was also popular in Britain. In a short review of an exhibition in Birmingham, *The Studio* commented on the craft:

The Javanese art of pattern-dyeing on silk, known as "Batik" has recently become popular, owing to the brilliant colour effects which are obtainable, frequently as the result of happy accident. This accidental quality may account for the numerous rainbow-tinted scarves and shawls seen everywhere; often fearful and wonderful creations.

However, a note of caution was also included, 'unless in the hands of a good designer the results are apt to be appalling'.<sup>18</sup>

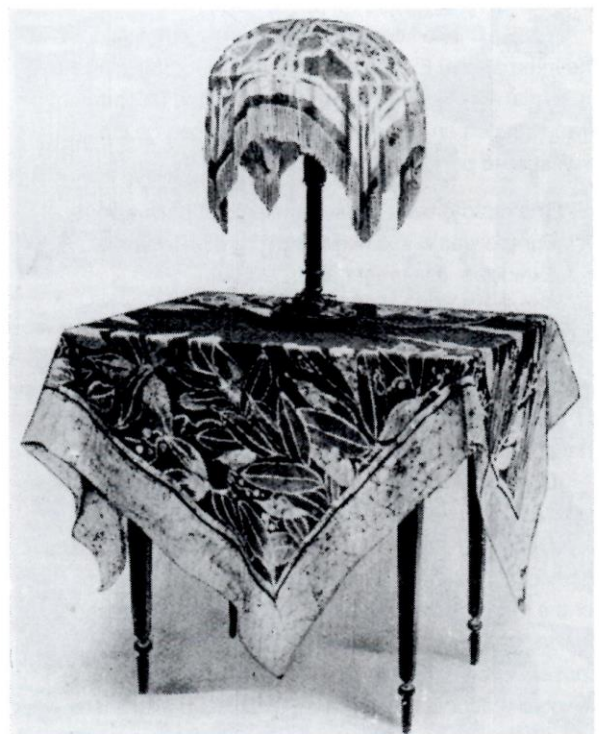


Figure 2. A batik table cover and lampshade from Cecile Francis-Lewis *A Practical Handbook on Le Batik*, 1924.



Figure 3. Dorn curtains in a bedroom from *Studio Yearbook of Decorative Art*, 1929.

Several practical guides provide further evidence of batik's popularity, for example, Cecile Francis Lewis' *A Practical Handbook on Le Batik* was published in 1920. (Figure 2). Lewis also offered instruction in the craft at her studio in Hanover Street, London, where the practitioner could also purchase materials and equipment.<sup>19</sup> Other exponents of the craft included Alice Pashley, Grace Digby and Jessie King.

Batik exhibits from several countries were included at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts held in Paris in 1925 and the Department of Trade's report on this exhibition commented on the widespread popularity of the craft:

The rapid growth in the popularity of batik-work in Europe was demonstrated everywhere in the Exhibition. It is taught as an elegant accomplishment in Paris, and young people learn the process in the craft-schools.<sup>20</sup>

Exhibits ranged from small items, such as scarves and handkerchiefs to large batiks from Denmark and Poland, that completely covered the walls of two rooms.

Dorn produced her batiks from the home she shared with McKnight Kauffer at 17 John Street, Adelphi. Dorothy Todd, editor of *Vogue* and Madge Garland, her assistant, interviewed Kauffer there in 1924, for a short piece on him for the magazine and Madge Garland was impressed by the batik patterns designed by Dorn.<sup>21</sup> It was as a probable consequence of this visit that the following year *Vogue* devoted a double page spread to Dorn's designs. Her work was described as 'patterned in an ultra-modern manner in brilliant colours'.<sup>22</sup> Much was made of the fact that Dorn

designed specifically for the locations the batiks would occupy and that the motif need never be repeated:

The dove design is one of Mrs Dorn's typical two colour schemes, golden yellow being used in this instance on a white linen ground. The geometric design ranges through all the shades of oranges from pale yellow to crimson and has been used with great success for the heavy silk curtains in a modern house.<sup>23</sup>

Dorn's work appeared in *Vogue* several times later in the same year. In October, two designs were illustrated, a design of ships, which was compared to a medieval tapestry; and a geometric design in green and yellow silk used in a bedroom for curtains, a bedhead and a bedspread.<sup>24</sup> Dorn's batiks were shown alongside the work of the notable French artists/textile designers Raoul Dufy and Robert Bonfils, both of whom were producing printed textile designs for Bianchini Ferrier in the 1920s.

Occasionally Dorn designed batiks for costumes. In 1925 she produced a batik scarf to adorn the costume of Ernest Milton in his role as Henry IV in Pirandello's play of that name. The design, a geometric Greek key pattern was produced in bright reds, yellows and oranges.<sup>25</sup> Another Dorn batik is in the Gallery of English Costume, Manchester, and appears as a border design on a dress of the mid 1920s. The pattern is batiked in pink on purple crepe de chine and depicts exotic flowers, palmettes, rose trees and carnations. The use of stylised tree form and plants, together with designs of stylised birds, horses and deer are characteristics of Dorn's early British batiks.

Her most striking designs for batik are the large hangings or curtains which dominated any room in which they were incorporated. The individual nature of these designs meant that they were usually commissioned by particular customers; for example, during the 1920s Dorn produced a series of batik hangings for Noel Coward. Such individual textiles designed and made by Dorn took on the function of a mural. In the 1929 issues of the *Studio Yearbook of Decorative Art* several Dorn designs appeared in 'The Modern Interior', an article by Dorothy Todd.<sup>26</sup> Figure 3 illustrates a small sitting-room with a pair of closed batiked curtains by Dorn, which depict a horse in a wood, they provide a dramatic area of colour and pattern in an otherwise plain interior. Designed to be viewed to advantage when almost flat, designs such as these would have looked extremely dramatic in the evening when closed but for most of the day the design would be hidden, when the curtains were pulled back. (Figure 4)

Dorn exploited the painterly possibilities of batik by producing 'one-off' individual curtains and hangings, which often operated as theatrical backdrops or important focal points in interiors. Generally these designs were pictorial narratives and included sea scenes (Figure 5), birds and animals, flowers and foliage. A few contained classical architectural details which were to become a feature of Dorn's work in the latter half of the 1930s. Towards the end of the 1920s Dorn's work changed dramatically, the designs developed from large pictorial motifs to small geometric patterns (Figure 6). Work of this kind marks Dorn's transition from artist-craftswoman to professional designer. By the end of the decade she was increasingly transferring her attentions to designing rugs and woven fabrics which were produced by other craft workers or produced by large textile companies. Her later batiks included repeating patterns and lent themselves to reproduction by hand-block printing and later hand-screen printing. By the early 1930s Dorn was concentrating on designing, leaving production to large firms who frequently employed her on a freelance basis.

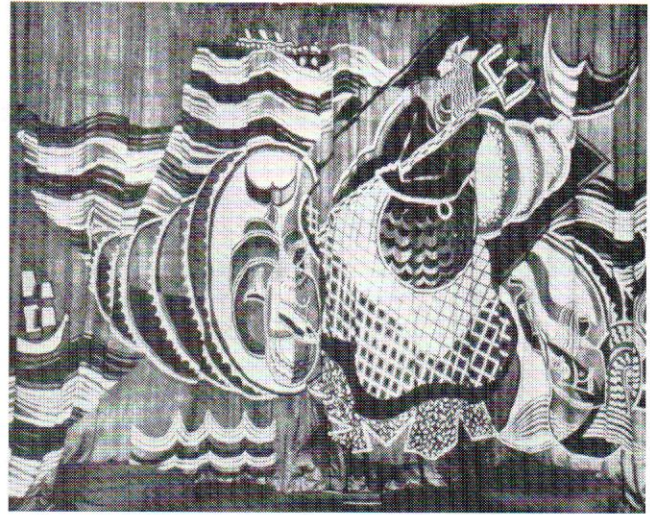
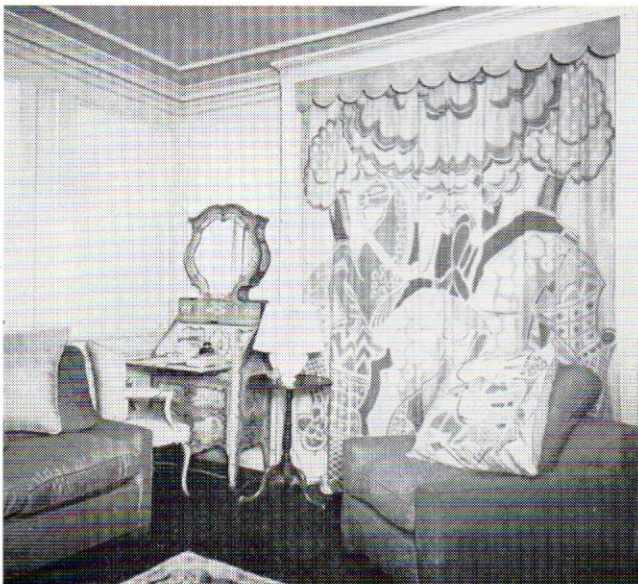
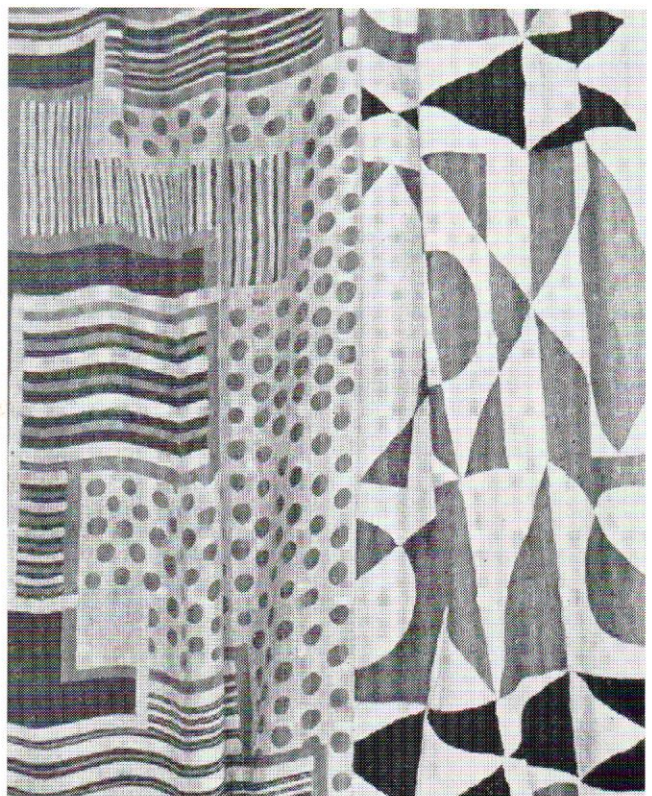


Figure 5. Batik curtains by Marion Dorn (*The New Interior Decoration*, 1929).

Dorn often produced batik designs to commission; other pieces were sold in the growing number of retail outlets devoted to the sale and exhibition of crafts. Her work could be purchased at Fearnley Limited, established in 1925 for the sale of fabrics, furniture, wallpapers, rugs, china, glass, pictures and antiques. The following year Elspeth Anne Little opened Modern Textiles, where Dorn's work could also be bought. She was one of eleven designers whose work was shown as part of the 'Modern Textiles' stand at the International Exhibition of Arts and Crafts in Leipzig in 1928.

The scant evidence available makes a full discussion of Dorn's formative years as a designer very difficult. Her education at Stanford University on the predominantly fine art-based Graphic Art course provided her with the opportunity to study some areas of design. The transition



textiles was probably influenced by contact with her New City neighbours, who were already enjoying some success in this area. The suitability of fabric design for a trained painter, accustomed to working in colour in two dimensions, may also have been a factor in her choice of textiles as a creative outlet and a potential source of income. The opportunity provided by the *Women's Wear* contests to facilitate introductions to textile manufacturers was an attractive inducement to an individual who wished to make a living as a designer. Dorn's adoption of the batik process provided a means of producing one-off pieces in which the motif was never repeated. Her designs were sometimes hung as decorative panels rather than as functional curtains or upholstery fabrics, giving her work the status of a painting. She would occasionally sign her batiks, to indicate their authenticity, a practice she frequently adopted for her later rug designs. An alternative process was not available to designers like Dorn until the development of hand-screen printing that which combined the advantages of the faithful reproduction of painterly designs and the possibility of producing fabric in larger quantities.

Dorn's chief contribution to batik design during the 1920s was in her creation of fabrics for interiors. Although batik was a popular craft at the time, most of Dorn's contemporaries tended to produce small scale designs for fashion fabrics. Dorn's concentration on fabrics for the interior, rather than on fashion textiles, was to extend by the end of the 1920s towards an interest in the development of designs for rugs, weaves and hand-screen printed textiles, thus widening her range.

*This article is an edited extract from Christine Boydell's forthcoming book 'The Architect of Floors: modernism, art and Marion Dorn designs'. The book is available at a special price of £15 (inc p&p) to Textile Society members from the author (tel.01722 865728). An exhibition of the same name will be shown at the Heinz Gallery, Portman Square, Nov 7 - Dec 21 1996, and at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester from Feb 6 - April 6 1997.*

## NOTES

- 1 C.Boydell, 'The Decorative Imperative: Marion Dorn's Textiles and Modernism' *Journal of the Decorative Arts Society*, No.19, 1995, pp.31-40. C Boydell, 'Women Textile Designers in the 1920s and 1930s: Marion Dorn a Case Study' in J Attfield and P Kirkham (eds), *A View From the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design*, Women's Press, 1989. V Mendes, 'Marion Dorn Textile Designer' in *Journal of the Decorative Arts Society*, No.2, 1978, pp.24-35. A Thackeray, 'Marion Dorn and Carpets of the 1930s' in *Leisure in the Twentieth Century*, Design Council, 1977.
- 2 Dorn's family was wealthy, her father Colonel D.S.Dorn practised law and was active in the work of rebuilding San Francisco after the 1906 fire. The family were often mentioned in the local San Francisco press and Marion

- 4 'Who's Who in American Art', *American Art Annual*, Vol.XVI, 1919.
- 5 R Bach, 'Museums and the Industrial World', *American Magazine of Art*, Vol.11, 1919-1920, p.364.
- 6 Letter from M D C Crawford to Dr Lucas (Director of the American Museum of Natural History) 26 August 1916, Department of Library Services Archives, American Museum of Natural History, New York.
- 7 M D C Crawford, 'Museum Documents and Modern Costume', *Natural History*, Vol.18, No.4, 1918, p.288.
- 8 M D C Crawford, *The Heritage of Cotton: The Fibre of Two Worlds and Many Ages*, Fairchild Publishing, 1924, p.200.
- 9 *Women's Wear*, 25 March 1921, p.35.
- 10 *Ibid*, 15 November 1920, p.1.
- 11 M Hoffman, 'Marion Dorn Gets Motifs For Her Art...' *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 December 1951.
- 12 N.Shilliam, 'From Bohemian to Bourgeois: American Batik in the Early Twentieth Century', *Contact, Crossover, Continuity*, Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America, 1994, pp.253-263.
- 13 Dr G Tagliani, 'Modern Batik Printing', *The American Still Journal*, October 1919, p.63.
- 14 'Batik in America', *Arts and Decoration*, August 1919, p.172.
- 15 *New York Times*, 3 August 1919, p.3.
- 16 I am grateful to Whitney Blausen for this information.
- 17 On October 29th 1923 Marion Dorn and Henry Varnum Poor were divorced, and towards the end of the year she was living with Kauffer in London.
- 18 *The Studio*, Vol.89, 1925, pp.282-283.
- 19 C Francis-Lewis, *A Practical Handbook on Le Batik*, Francis-Lewis Studio, 1924.
- 20 Department of Overseas Trade, *Reports on the Present Position and Tendencies of the Industrial Arts as Indicated at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, Paris*, 1925, p.73.
- 21 Interview with Lady Ashton (Madge Garland), 17 August 1984.
- 22 'New Furnishing Fabrics', *Vogue*, Early May, pp.50-51.
- 23 *Ibid*.
- 24 'New Decorative Fabrics' *Vogue*, Late October, 1925, p.48.
- 25 *Vogue*, Early August, 1925, p.54.
- 26 D Todd, 'The Modern Interior' *Studio Yearbook of Decorative Art*, 1929, p.64.