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Free-lance Textile Design in the 1930s: An Improving Prospect?

In December 1931 Warner & Sons produced their first hand-screen printed textile—'Shrubbery' [1]. The design had been purchased from Miss V. Muller for £7. This apparently minor historical moment marks the beginning of a development in both the process of printing and the source of designs for textiles. These developments originated in a relatively small sector of the textile industry between 1931 and 1939, but had a wider application after the war. Warners' decision to introduce a new process, with the design provided by a free-lancer, is significant for the history of textiles. Hand-screen printing was introduced not by the industry as a whole but by a small number of firms who were actively interested in improving design as suggested by contemporary design reformers. These firms added hand-screen printing to the more established printing techniques and purchased an increasing number of designs from free-lance designers during the 1930s.

This article will describe and account for the changes in the practice of purchasing designs in the 1930s, which coincided with the introduction of hand-screen printing. Additionally, an examination will be made of how these developments were perceived by contemporary commentators who, while aware that innovations in production and sources of design were taking place, were unable adequately to describe or account for them. In fact, some of the contemporary responses are contradictory. The contradiction centres around the question of to what extent the changes in the way textiles were designed represented a significant development in the status of the textile designer, or simply a change in working practices brought about by the application of a new process. This paper will clarify and comment on the contradictions by firstly looking at the sources for designs used by textile companies. It will also describe changes in the relationship between manufacturers and designers during the decade. An examination will be made of the place of hand-screen

printing in relation to other techniques used for the production of fabrics, both printed and woven. Company records suggest that a large proportion of designs for hand-screen printed fabrics were purchased from women free-lancers; within the wider context of free-lance design the significance of this factor will be evaluated. In 1935 R. D. Simpson, design director at Morton Sundour, concluded that recent developments in the textile industry represented 'an improving prospect' for the designer of textiles—but how accurate is his observation?¹

Hand-screen Printing

Experimental forms of hand-screen printing were being developed at the beginning of the century by individuals such as Mariano Fortuny. However, the process was not used commercially until 1926 when it was adopted by a number of textile companies in France. The hand-screen technique was the first major new development in textile printing since the invention of mechanized roller printing at the end of the eighteenth century. It was one of three methods of printing used to apply pattern to fabric used by the textile industry in the 1930s; the others were hand-block and machine-roller printing. Hand-block printing had a limited application due to its slowness and cost, although it was used by some manufacturers to print short runs or experimental designs. More commonly used was the mechanized roller printer. In this process the design was engraved on copper rollers, with one roller used for each colour in the design and the full width of fabric could be printed. The method was ideal for producing large quantities of a particular design—20,000 yards of fabric using eight colours could be printed in one day of production.² The main disadvantage of roller printing was the large yardage required to cover the cost of engraving the copper rollers,³ and a large capital outlay was needed to cover the initial expense

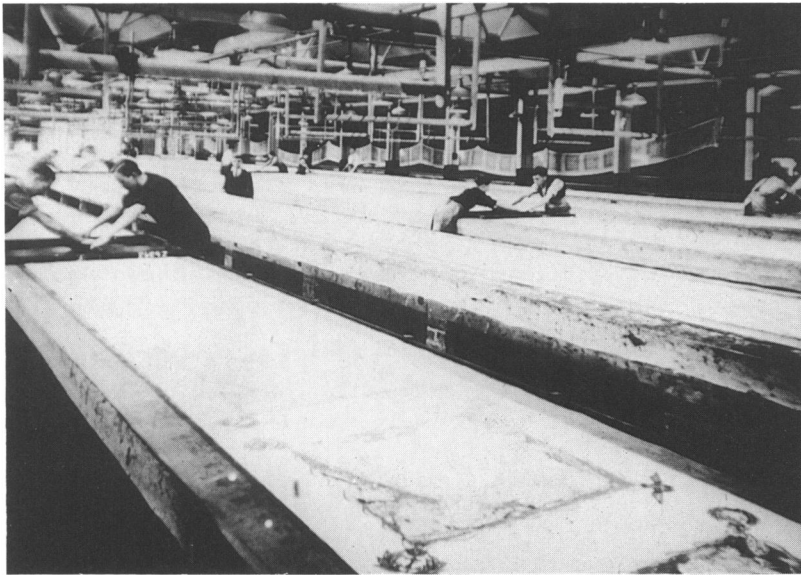


1 'Shrubbery' by Miss V. Muller, the first design to be hand-screen printed by Warner & Sons, 1931

of buying machinery. Hand-screen printing, a development of stencilling, had several advantages over these two techniques. It was much quicker than hand-block printing and compared to the machine roller technique required little initial outlay, and relatively short lengths of fabric could be produced more economically. It was also possible by this method to print on textured fabric and, although it

was not possible to reproduce the fine lines that could be achieved by other methods, the technique had the advantage of the possibility of the reproduction of brushwork, or dappled and etched effects.

In Britain in the early 1930s a small number of firms began to produce fabric with designs applied by means of hand-screen printing [2]. For example, Warner & Sons and Morton Sundour's Edinburgh



2 Hand-screen printing at Langley, Macclesfield

Weavers were both early exponents of this process. Often the firms that introduced this technique into production were companies already using the other hand process, block printing. The 1930s marked a period of familiarization and experimentation with hand-screen printing; however, it was not widely adopted until mechanized methods of screen printing were developed in the 1950s and 1960s. Initially the employment of hand-screen printing was limited to the production of short runs or experimental modern designs, and was considered to be an alternative method to hand-block printing. The early designs differed little from those which were printed by block. However, by the middle of the decade the full potential of the technique could be seen in a number of designs produced by well-known firms such as Warners and smaller companies like Allan Walton Textiles.

Hand-screen printing was developed by textile companies for a number of reasons. In addition to the technical and artistic advantages it held over other processes, it provided the possibility of relatively low-priced experimentation. As a consequence of low investment costs larger numbers of designs could be printed to cater for a variety of tastes and could be used as a means of responding rapidly to calls for design reform. Although during the decade under discussion one cannot refer to hand-screen printing as an industry-wide practice, its small-scale adoption by a number of firms is significant in the relationship this had to both

stylistic developments in design and, more significantly for this paper, the changing practices of some companies in obtaining designs from outside their own studios.

Sources of Designs

Furnishing textiles are items within an interior scheme which are most frequently replaced as they provide a relatively cheap means of creating a new look for a room. Consequently the textile industry has always been a voracious consumer of designs from a variety of sources and, according to Captain W. Turnbull (joint Managing Director of the Lancashire firm Turnbull & Stockdale Limited) in 1935, the textile sector used more designs than any other industry.⁴ The industry did not rely on just one source for these designs, and it is clear that different practices operated for the acquisition of designs for woven and printed textiles. These variable practices have a direct relationship to the place of free-lance designers within the industry.

Manufacturers obtained designs for textiles from a number of sources: some came from their own design studios, some from British and Continental commercial design studios, and some from free-lance designers. In his article Turnbull described the distribution of sources as: '42% from studio staff of textile works, 13% from English commercial studios, 42% from the Continent, and 3% from free lance designers'.⁵ The statistics Turnbull cites could well

be the same as those reported by the British Institute of Industrial Art eight years before,⁶ but they indicate the small proportion of designs originating from free-lance designers compared to factory and commercial studios. However, Nikolaus Pevsner, relying on the same figures as Turnbull, regarded this small input from free-lancers as artistically significant.⁷ The 42 per cent of designs emanating from factory studios were produced by a small number of designers. At Warner & Sons during the 1920s and 1930s there were on average five employees working in the studio, two as designers, the others as assistants. Assistants occasionally produced designs, but their more usual tasks included colouring designs, adapting existing designs or redrawing designs bought from free-lancers and commercial studios [3]. Examination of practices at other companies shows studios with similar numbers of design staff.⁸

In his investigation into the designer in industry which appeared in *Architectural Review* in 1936 and was reproduced in the book *Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* the following year, Pevsner asked the three most progressive textile manufacturers what was the ratio of factory studio-produced designs to designs purchased from outside sources. The answer was as follows:

the first, some years 50 per cent. to 50 per cent., the second, in prints 40 per cent. to 60 per cent., in weaves 95 per cent. to 5 per cent.; the third, in prints the majority bought, in weaves the majority worked out between director and manager.⁹

The major difference between the number of designs for wovens and prints purchased from outside the manufacturer's studio is significant. It was much more common for designs for prints to be purchased from a commercial studio or from a free-lance



3 The design studio at Warner & Sons, Braintree, Essex, 1935

designer as well as being produced in-house, while designs for woven fabrics were most often completed in the factory studio. The main reason for this was regarded as technical. It was possible for most designers with some training in pattern-making to create designs for printed fabrics, since the only specialist knowledge needed was the ability to be able to put a design into repeat and to be aware of the limitations and possibilities of the various printing methods available. The question of whether a designer required some technical knowledge in order to design weaves was hotly debated during the period. Most training in wovens was either in the form of specialist technical education provided for individuals already working in the textile industry or through craft classes in hand-weaving techniques and design. There were two schools of thought regarding the participation of free-lance designers in the production of woven fabrics from both commentators and manufacturers. On the one hand it was felt that free-lance designers should steer well clear of wovens, as their lack of knowledge of the technical aspects of the medium usually resulted in poor designs.¹⁰ Others believed that with the right kind of collaboration between the designer and technician any problem could be overcome.¹¹ However, it was the former view that seemed to predominate during the 1930s. Nikolaus Pevsner commented on the problem:

The works' designer, who can keep in close contact with the technicians and workers, is the right man for the creation of new weaves; the outside artist, who is supposed to be more imaginative or more facile, because he is not restricted by the narrow life of a mill, is more appropriately employed for printed patterns.¹²

Ernest Goodale, Managing Director of Warner & Sons and President of the Federation of British Furnishing Textile Manufacturers, explained the practice at his own company:

Woven design is produced entirely by members of the production staff, but for prints the studios are supplemented from outside sources, both English and French.¹³

At Morton Sundour too, the majority of designs for weaves were produced in the works' own studios, although a small number of designs came from free-lance designers or commercial studios. Maurice Rena recorded comments of textile manufacturers who

explained their problems in finding suitable designs from outside the mill studio:

They say they are on the look-out for the best artistic work for their high-class materials, but 'find difficulty in getting the right type of designs, for as they can see there is not a single free-lance artist-designer in England who sufficiently understands the technicalities of machine weaving.'¹⁴

Thus, textile companies usually had most woven and some printed designs produced by in-house designers, working full-time in the factory studio with many attending part-time courses at local technical schools. Designs for prints were also purchased from commercial studios, with a small number coming from free-lance designers. Furthermore, increasingly during the 1930s, the greater number of designs from these free-lancers were for hand-screen printed fabrics.

Free-lance Designers

There were a number of factors which had an impact on raising the profile of the free-lance designer during the 1930s. These included the influence of design reform, the marketing value of using designer names, increased opportunities for artistic experimentation provided by hand-screen printing, along with lower design costs and protectionist legislation. The artistic climate of the early 1930s, with initiatives from the design establishment, stimulated manufacturers in many areas to buy work from independent designers. Some manufacturers saw the drawbacks of only employing staff designers. Keith Murray was of the opinion that although the staff designer (usually male) was an important component of the company:

he spends his life in one type of work, and probably in one neighbourhood, he tends to become in the course of time rather absorbed in routine and out of touch with outside influences. But he is a valuable man and the mainstay in the production side of his factory.¹⁵

It was also felt that there was a danger of a lack of variety if a company relied solely on its staff designers, resulting in a 'factory studio style'.¹⁶

Whilst free-lance designers had been an important component of the French textile industry since the 1920s, perhaps as a consequence of the earlier adoption of hand-screen printing there, they only began

to have an impact in Britain in the early 1930s. During the 1920s the significance of France in textile design could be seen in the number of designs bought by the British textile industry from French agents and studios. For example, the Libert studio of Paris regularly sold designs to Sandersons, G. P. & J. Baker, and Warner & Sons. Not all designs bought from France were necessarily made by French designers, but such was the reputation of the French that in 1929 the Board of Education in its pamphlet *Design and the Cotton Industry* noted:

There is evidence that the free-lance artist is more likely to get his designs placed if he commissions a French agent than if he tries to place them himself.¹⁷

The Board also felt that improved public taste was in part responsible for increased demand and urged industry to pay more attention to design:

As a result of the undoubted rise in the general level of taste in this and other countries, the demand for good design is increasing . . . It is, therefore, vitally important that effective means shall be found to draw into the service of the industry men and women of trained artistic ability. This is being done by other industries, notably those in the Potteries, Birmingham and Leicester, and the cotton industry cannot afford to remain indifferent.¹⁸

A large proportion of the textile designs bought from free-lancers were produced using the hand-screen printing process and this lent itself to designs produced by fine artists many of whom sold work to the textile industry during the 1930s. The economic depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s meant that many individuals including painters, commercial artists, and architects were struggling to continue to make a living in their chosen professions. The possibility of producing designs for textile companies using the screen printing process was a viable one for artists. The Society of Industrial Artists, founded in 1930, was among a number of organizations active in encouraging their participation in industry.

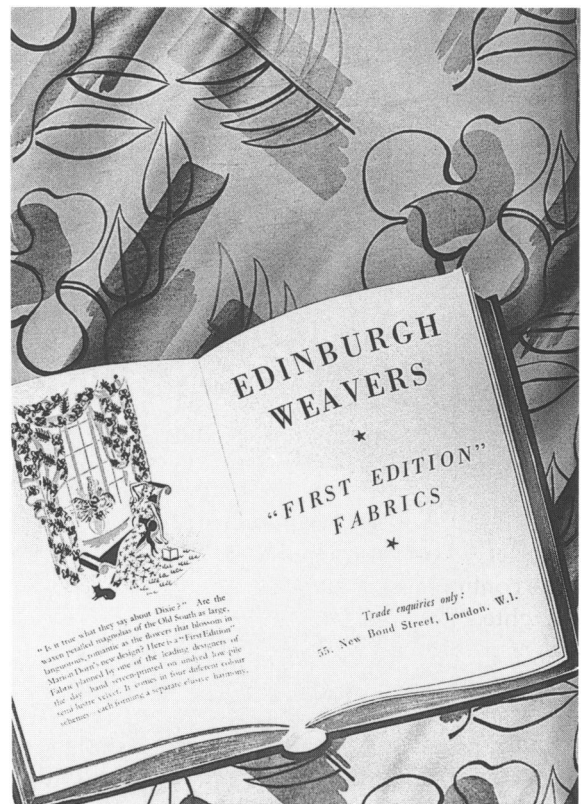
Many fine artists designed textiles on a free-lance basis for some of the more progressive textile manufacturers of the day: for example, companies such as Morton Sundour's Edinburgh Weavers used designs from Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, and Ashley Havinden, while Old Bleach Linen bought designs from Paul Nash and Bernard Adeney. The combina-

tion of the economic climate and the desire by textile manufacturers to improve their products, as a response to calls for a marriage between art and industry (by such bodies as the Council for Art and Industry and the Design and Industries Association), led to increasing opportunities for artists.

Manufacturers also began to realize the benefits of selling textiles using the name of a designer and promoting the textile as analogous to fine art [4]. *The Studio* had commented on the emerging practice of naming designers as early as 1926:

almost for the first time in the history of industrial production in this country, the names of the designers, usually so carefully suppressed, [are] publicly and prominently associated with the selling of goods.¹⁹

And by the mid-1930s the designer's name frequently appeared in advertisements for textile designs [5]. The trend to attribute designs meant that

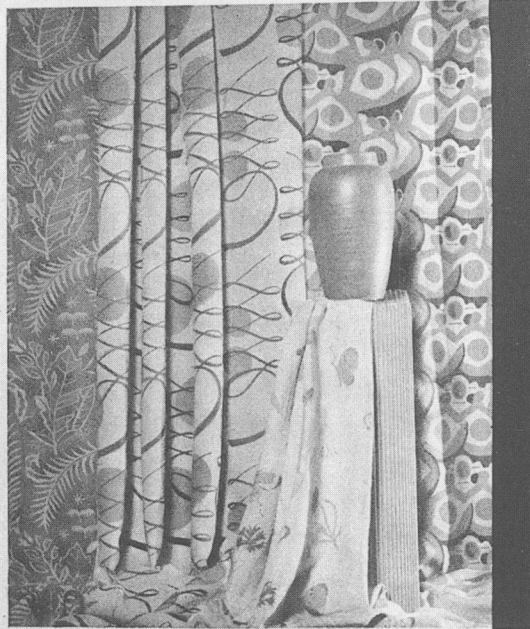


4 Advertisement for Edinburgh Weavers' 'Magnolia', a hand-screen printed design by Marion Dorn

Modern Artists design for Old Bleach

A series of beautiful Old Bleach woven linens which will delight everyone who is interested in the development of modern art as applied to fabrics.

It includes work by **PAUL NASH, MARION DORN, NICHOLAS DE MOLAS** and **BERNARD ADENEY**. The designs are hand-printed on a ground already carrying a woven design in self colour. Any good shop will show you patterns — or write straight to Old Bleach.



OLD BLEACH Furnishing Fabrics

OLD BLEACH LINEN CO. LTD., RANDALSTOWN, NORTHERN IRELAND Trade Enquiries: Leith House, 47 Gresham St., London, E.C.2. Phone: National 8006

5 Old Bleach Linen advertisement illustrating fabrics designed for the company by Paul Nash, Marion Dorn, Nicholas de Molas, and Bernard Adeney

even the normally anonymous staff designers began to be named occasionally as well, and it encouraged independent artists and designers to consider textiles as an option now that it enjoyed greater status. The issue continued to be discussed and in 1938 J. A. Milne considered the benefits to the industry of employing artists as designers (although he stressed they should have some understanding of technology).²⁰ A good example of technician and artist working together is evident in the designs produced by artists for Edinburgh Weavers 'Constructivist Fabrics' range which appeared in 1937. In 1948 Alec Hunter of Warners recorded that the employment of artists continued to be a worthwhile practice and he highlighted the well-established custom of his company of purchasing work from artist designers who were drawing on 'experience from other fields and inspiration from other sources' which, he considered, could 'bring refreshment and vitality to the surface pattern'. Hunter was in agreement with Milne: that the ideal situation was one in which the free-lance designer worked in close association with a sympathetic technician.²¹

Another factor which may also have had a significant effect on the increase in the number of free-lance textile designers employed by the industry in subsequent years was the implementation of tariffs on the import of various manufactured goods, including textiles. In order to counter the adverse trade balance faced by the British economy, Parliament passed the Abnormal Importations (Customs Duties) Act in November 1931. Import duties were then charged on various goods²² until the government was able to devise a new tariff policy. In November and December of the same year, temporary duties of 50 per cent were imposed on tissues of wool, linen, jute, and cotton. The import Duties Act came into operation in March 1932 and imposed a duty of 10 per cent on any goods not already subject to duty. Four months later the 10 per cent was increased to 20 per cent, but the original 50 per cent duty was then withdrawn, to the dismay of manufacturers. However, this high duty had the desired effect. Ernest Goodale, then President of the Federation of British Furnishing Fabrics, commented in 1938:

Largely as a result of the anti-dumping duty of 50 per cent . . . considerable impetus was given to British industry, including, in particular, the furnishing fabric industry in this country. Whereas before buyers automatically turned to the Continent, they were forced, under this measure, to turn to their home suppliers, with very encouraging results on both sides.²³

This drop in imports of foreign-finished textiles which had previously come from Germany, France, Belgium, and Italy meant that the manufacturer of furnishing fabrics in Britain was in a position to produce and sell more goods than previously. This in turn may have produced a demand for a greater number of designs. If this were so an immediate means of filling the demand could have been met by free-lance designers.

An examination of the comprehensive records of a company like Warners indicates an increase in the number of designs bought from free-lance designers from just nine designs between 1930 and 1933 to thirty-seven designs between 1934 and 1937.²⁴ This rise is also indicated in the records of Heal & Sons which demonstrate that a growing number of fabrics produced by a variety of companies and sold in the store were designed by freelancers.²⁵ Evidence of the increase in numbers of individuals operating as free-lance textile designers is provided in H. G. Hayes Marshall's book, *British Textile Designers Today*, which was published in 1939. The publication discussed comprehensively the men and women who were involved in textile design at the time.²⁶ Hayes Marshall concentrated on free-lance designers, describing his work as a 'Who's Who' for the industry and for anyone buying or commissioning textile designs. The book dealt mainly with designers of furnishing textiles, and while its concentration was on free-lance designers it also covered some in-house designers, who had at one time worked as free-lancers. In addition it included small studios and partnerships from which the industry commissioned designs. Hayes Marshall included an index in which he listed 240 designers, studios, or partnerships designing textiles. The main body of the book consisted of an alphabetical collection of designers, with a short account of the work of each together with some black and white illustrations of their designs. The publication of *British Textile Designers Today* indicates a recognition of the growing number and importance of free-lance

designers working in the medium of textiles by the end of the 1930s.

Women Free-lance Designers

In addition to providing evidence that the numbers of free-lance designers increased during the 1930s, both records in several company archives and Hayes Marshall's book indicate that a significant proportion of free-lance designers were women. There are a number of reasons why this should have been the case, and the importance of women's traditional association with the production of textiles for the home and their changing practices within the area must be considered. The relationship of women designers to general reformist ideas, as well as their predominance as designers for the hand-screen printing process is also investigated.

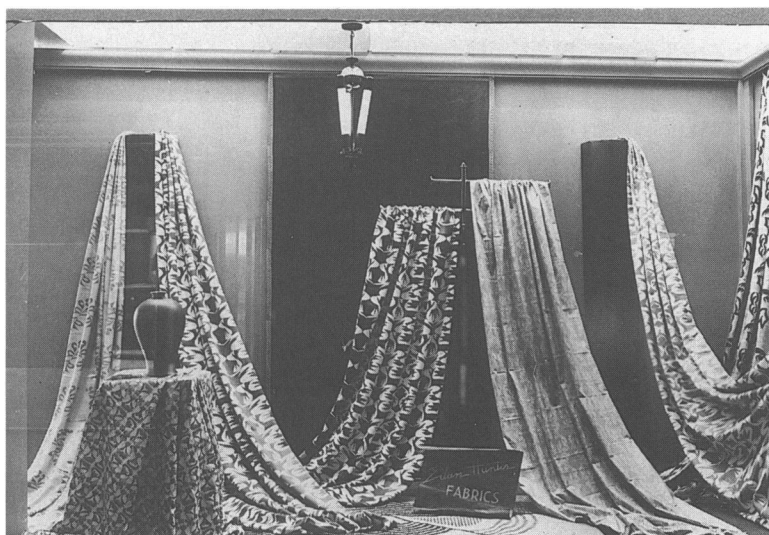
The involvement of male designers in textiles was as full-time professionals who at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries worked from within the industry as staff designers (for example, Bertrand Whittaker at Warners), as free-lance designers for a number of firms and in a variety of media including textiles (for example, Owen Jones, Lewis F. Day, and C. F. A. Voysey), or headed their own studios, supplying designs to the industry (for example, Arthur and Rex Silver). However, women's involvement was less straightforward. Women's relationship to the creative production of textiles developed in three distinctive ways. To begin with, women were involved in the creation of clothing and embroidery for family consumption (activities expected of, particularly, middle-class women for centuries). Women rarely received any financial reward for such work, items being regarded for their utility rather than their exchange value. At the end of the nineteenth century, when middle-class women began to work in textiles outside the home, they were involved mainly in the creative interpretation of the embroidery designs of men.²⁷ At this time women were beginning to enjoy the benefits of art school training and by the First World War they were experimenting in the design and production of hand-printed textiles; for example, Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher had attended art school before setting up a business hand-block printing textiles in 1923. This was the experience of a number of women, and it marks a

transitional stage from the production of textiles for the domestic sphere to the sale of fabrics in a (limited) commercial context. During the 1920s and 1930s a number of these craftswomen abandoned the production process altogether to concentrate on design, selling their work to large textile companies; thus their work was transported from the domestic sphere or a narrow commercial context to the sphere of mass production and high-turnover retail.

As well as working as craftswomen, a few ran their own businesses, or were employed as staff designers for textile manufacturers, while an increasing number were working as free-lance designers. Several women were operating as craftswomen, reflecting the continued interest in craft activity during the 1920s and early 1930s. Ethel Mairet ran the hand-weaving workshop 'Gospels' in Ditchling, Sussex, while others continued to produce hand-block printed textiles. As well as Barron and Larcher whose workshop operated until the outbreak of war, Enid Marx and Joyce Clissold also practised hand-block printing. Marianne Straub and Theo Moorman are examples of the small number of women employed as staff designers by the textile industry. Straub was head designer for Helios (a subsidiary of the Lancashire cotton spinning company Barlow & Jones), and was eventually managing director until 1950 when she joined Warner & Sons.²⁸ Theo Moorman worked as a staff designer for hand- and power-loom fabrics at Warner & Sons, being

employed by the company in 1935 to establish an exclusive hand-weaving department for modern designs. She worked for the company until the outbreak of the war in 1939 when she established herself as a free-lance designer. However, women employed in this way were the exception rather than the rule.

A few women ran their own companies, including Marion Dorn and Eileen Hunter. Eileen Hunter had no formal artistic training, but began designing patterns for furnishing fabrics after visiting the Victoria and Albert Museum in the late 1920s.²⁹ Her designs were made up of large-scale repeats of brightly coloured abstract patterns [6]. Hunter did not produce fabrics herself, but had her designs printed by others. Her early work was hand-block printed by Handprints, a company run by Miss Smithers in Chiswick. Later designs were hand-block or hand-screen printed for her by Warner & Sons in the unusually small quantity of three yard lengths.³⁰ Although Warners had offered to buy her designs, Hunter preferred to have control of her own work. She found that the only efficient way of getting her prints into retail outlets was to set up her own business, 'Eileen Hunter Fabrics', in 1933. Her designs appeared at the 1935 Burlington House British Art in Industry Exhibition, and were used in the Paddington Hotel, London and the Queens Hotel Birmingham. She employed a salesman to travel around the country and promote her designs, ran her



6 Eileen Hunter fabrics on display at Henry Barker's, Nottingham, mid-1930s

own wholesale company from 1933 to 1934, and exported her fabrics to France, Holland, the USA, and Canada.³¹

Like Eileen Hunter, Marion Dorn set up her own limited company in 1934. She had begun her career as a craftswoman—designing, making, and selling her own batik furnishing fabrics. By 1926 she had diversified into rug design but at this point she moved away from craft activity and initially commissioned other craftswomen to produce rugs to her designs and later she approached manufacturers such as Wilton Royal. This pattern of development was also evident in her designs for furnishing fabrics produced during the 1930s. Dorn either commissioned manufacturers to produce her designs for both prints and weaves or operated as a free-lance designer mainly selling print designs to companies such as Donald Brothers, Edinburgh Weavers, Old Bleach Linen, and Warner & Sons [7].³²

Dorn was amongst a number of women who were transferring their skills from hand-craft production to free-lance design for industry during the decade. The greater freedom of designing on a free-lance basis, along with the more socially acceptable idea of women working from the home or private studio, rather than being employed in a male-dominated mill studio, provided women with the opportunity to move away from craftwork into the more flexible area of free-lance designs for large textile manufacturers. Their increased participation was also

aided by the factors which influenced the general increase in free-lancers already indicated.

Hayes Marshall's *British Textile Designers Today* provides some information on the number of women designers and the kind of work they were producing. In his index of 240 designers, 103 names are identifiable as those of women.³³ Included in the more detailed section are 49 male and 30 female designers. Of the male designers discussed only 29 of the 49 worked as free-lance designers. Of the 30 women, 25 fit into the category of free-lance designers of furnishing fabrics (the others either concentrated on embroidery or cannot be classed as free-lance designers). Of the 25 women who were working as free-lance designers, 21 had some kind of art school training—like many of the male designers included, the majority of these are listed as having a background in painting. Evidence analysed from a study of the archives of several textile companies of the time has shown that more women than ever were being employed on this basis.³⁴ Surviving material at Warner Fabrics Limited (formerly Warner & Sons), a company which saw a significant increase in the number of designs bought from free-lancers, provides detailed information on the source and method of production of printed textiles as well as where the design originated. The company's design record books provide valuable information as to the type of print designs bought from male and female designers (see Tables 1 and 2).³⁵ The most significant



7 Fabrics by Warner & Sons (left to right): 'Bamboo Grass' by Herbert Woodman (he worked in the Warners' design studio); 'Anchor' by Marion Dorn; 'Waltham' by Rex Silver (he headed the Silver Studio, a successful commercial design company); 'Acorn and Oakleaf' and 'Falling Leaf' both by Marion Dorn; the latter was produced as a special for Gordon Russell Limited (rather than the usual flat fee for free-lance designs, Dorn received a 3d. royalty for every yard of these fabrics sold)

Table 1 Female Free-lancers: Numbers of Designs Purchased by Warner & Sons between 1929 and 1940

| Name | Screen Print | Block Print | Roller Print | Total |
|------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------|
| L. C. Aldred | 5 | | | 5 |
| Miss Aufseeser | 2 | | 1 | 3 |
| Miss Bochal (Vienna) | 1 | | | 1 |
| J. Cheeseman | 2 | | | 2 |
| Miss Cobham | 1 | | | 1 |
| Eva Crofts | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| Mrs Davis | | 2 | | 2 |
| Marion Dorn | 12 | 3 | | 15 |
| Olga Gemes | | 1 | | 1 |
| Mrs Green | | | 3 | 3 |
| Miss S. J. Haslop | 1 | | | 1 |
| Mrs Hind | | 1 | | 1 |
| Mrs Holmlea | 1 | | | 1 |
| Margaret Jones | 1 | | | 1 |
| Marianne Mahler | 1 | | | 1 |
| Miss E. Marsh | 2 | | | 2 |
| Mrs Millar | 1 | | 1 | 2 |
| Mrs V. Mollar | | | 1 | 1 |
| Riette Sturge Moore | 1 | | | 1 |
| Maureen Nicholson | 1 | | | 1 |
| Mrs M. R. R. Robertson | | | 2 | 2 |
| Margaret Simeon | 1 | | | 1 |
| Alice H. Umpleby | | 1 | | 1 |
| Miss Wakeham | | 1 | | 1 |
| Sheila Walsh | 2 | | | 2 |
| Totals | 36 | 10 | 8 | 52 |

Table 2 Male Free-lancers: Numbers of Designs Purchased by Warner & Sons between 1929 and 1940

| Name | Screen Print | Block Print | Roller Print | Total |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------|
| Ernst Aufseeser | 2 | 3 | 1 | 6 |
| Henry Butter | | | 1 | 1 |
| E. H. Cristelle | | 1 | | 1 |
| Doran | 1 | 3 | 7 | 11 |
| Griffiths | | | 2 | 2 |
| Forrer | | | 1 | 1 |
| R. Kramer | 1 | | | 1 |
| Reynolds | | 2 | | 2 |
| Silas | | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| P. C. Stockford | 1 | | | 1 |
| Hans Tisdall | 1 | | | 1 |
| Wheelwright | 6 | | 4 | 10 |
| Geo H. Willis | | | 4 | 4 |
| P. E. Willis | | | 1 | 1 |
| Totals | 12 | 10 | 22 | 44 |

information that can be gleaned from a study of these records is the large number of designs for hand-screen prints bought from women. Between 1929 and 1940 the company bought thirty-six designs from seventeen different women; this compares with just twelve designs for screen prints from six male designers. However, if one studies the figures for roller prints one sees male designers predominating, twenty-two designs being bought from nine male designers, compared with eight designs purchased from five women. The figures for designs for hand-block printed textiles are more equitable, ten designs by five male designers compared to ten designs by seven different female designers. It is likely that the choice of technique to be used to print a particular design was left to the manufacturer, who would receive designs from an individual and then decide on the most suitable technique. This would depend not only on the style of the design but, more importantly, on the quantities of anticipated sales. The screen printing technique was probably reserved for patterns which were more experimental in nature and therefore likely to appeal to a more limited market.

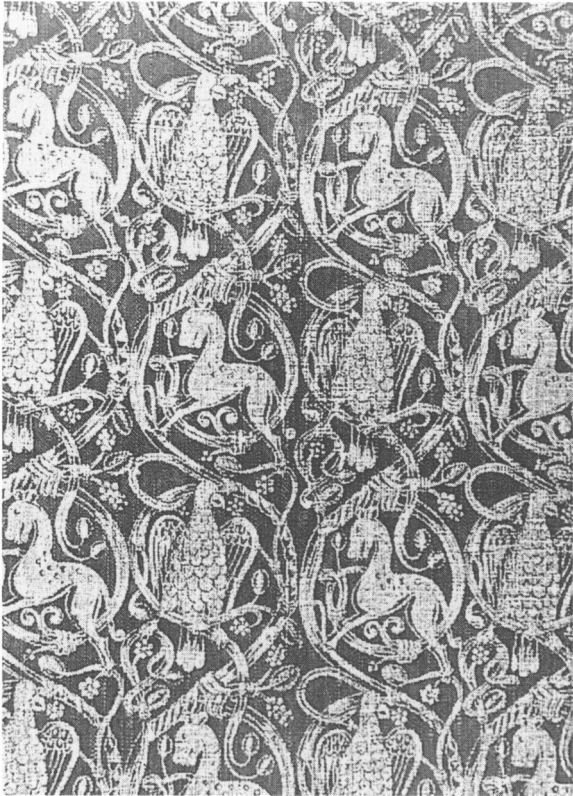
The disparity between the number of hand-screen print and roller print designs from men and women is not easy to explain; the records of most manufacturers do not usually specify what technique was employed to print each design. The exception to this is found in the records of Warner & Sons, where roller printed designs were usually bought from well-established male professional designers or studios. This was probably due to the nature of the technique, for in order to cover the expensive cost of having the rollers engraved, a large quantity of fabric had to be printed and sold. It would seem sensible therefore that the company should choose designs which they felt confident would sell well, and therefore they bought them from tried and tested designers and studios. The prices which manufacturers paid for roller printed designs were higher than for those which were hand-screen printed: on average in the mid-1930s a design which was roller printed would cost between 10 and 18 guineas, while for a hand-screen print the price would drop to between 7 and 12 guineas.³⁶ Again, this disparity was probably due to the larger print run and expected sales of a design which had been roller printed. In terms of payments made for designs there

seems to be no difference between the prices men and women were paid. A study of records of payments to designers from the companies examined indicates that it was the well-established designers and studios who seemed to enjoy higher prices for their designs; groups such as the Libert Studio in Paris and the Haward and Silver Studios in England, and designers such as J. S. Wheelwright were being paid top prices for their work. Significantly, these studios were generally owned and run by men.

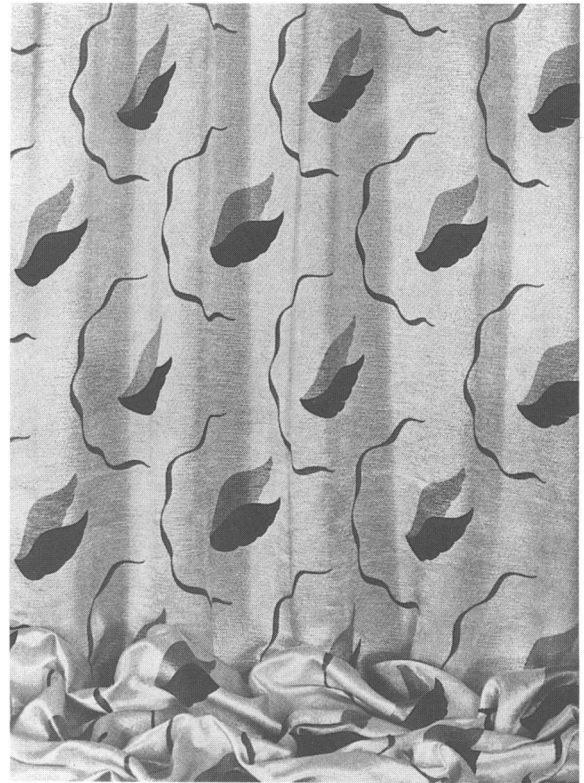
It seems that women only made an impact as designers of textiles for industry from about 1934. Since they were generally new to free-lance work it is likely that the majority of their designs were chosen to be screen printed, a technique that tended to be used for short runs of fabric, therefore minimizing the manufacturer's risk when using the work of often unfamiliar designers. Also, since the process was replacing hand-block printing, many women who had practical experience of this method would already possess a basic knowledge of the requirements of surface pattern design. It is no coincidence, therefore, that once hand-screen printing had been established as a significant element in the production of experimental work by some manufacturers, designs by free-lance women were considered suitable for this production process.

There were several women free-lance textile designers whose names regularly appear in both the textile company records and in the art and design press of the day. An example was Mea Angerer, who had trained in Vienna with Josef Hoffmann and had several designs produced by the Wiener Werkstätte. She came to England in 1928 where she worked as a staff designer for Sandersons' Eton Rural Fabrics for eighteen months, then moved on to work as a free-lance designer for G. P. & J. Baker, Warner & Sons, and Donald Brothers [8]. Anne Holmlea's designs were bought by several textile companies including G. P. & J. Baker, Turnbull & Stockdale, and Warners. The list of women working in this way is long, but some of the names appearing more frequently include Eva Aufseeser, Louise Aldred [9], Josephine Cheeseman, Marianne Mahler, Sheila Walsh, Eva Crofts, Riette Sturge Moore, and Margaret Simeon. The work of these women has yet to be studied in any detail.

Although many women were working as textile designers in the 1930s, most of the best-known



8 'Robsart', a printed crash linen by Mea Angerer for Donald Brothers



9 'Hermes', a printed satin by Louise Aldred for Warner & Sons, 1936. The textile used four screens and Aldred was paid 10 guineas for the design

names associated with the discipline at the time were men. Female textile designers tended to work exclusively in textiles, whereas many of the men who worked within the disciplines were involved in other areas of art and design, such as painting, architecture, or commercial design. Only a limited number, of whom Ronald Grierson is an example, worked exclusively in textile design; most were better known as painters (for example, Ben Nicholson and Paul Nash), or as commercial artists (for example, Ashley Havinden). For such men textile design was regarded as a secondary interest. Antony Hunt interviewed seven textile designers for an article in 1938 and had this to say of Havinden,

Ashley does not regard his fabric and rug design as work. They are the result of play rather than work in the sense that he is independent of their earning capacity.³⁷

Free-lance Textile Design in the 1930s

Unlike their female contemporaries these male designers gained free-lance work in textiles on the strength of their more 'serious' work in the highly valued areas mentioned above. They were often approached by textile manufacturers who saw the potential of employing a famous person from the world of fine art. Other male textile designers were primarily involved in textiles on the manufacturing side. (Allan Walton and William Foxtan are among a number who headed their own companies.)

Conclusions

In spite of what seemed to be significant propaganda to encourage the use of free-lance designers from organizations such as the Council of Art and Industry, the Design and Industries Association, and the

Society of Industrial Artists, and from individuals such as Nikolaus Pevsner and Keith Murray, some words of caution were voiced. As joint Managing Director of the Lancashire company Turnbull & Stockdale and a member of the Committee on the Training of Designers, W. Turnbull offered the following warning in 1935:

As a last resort, there remains free-lance designing. In my opinion, this should only be undertaken as a means to an end—the end being to find out the requirements of the trade with a view to getting into a studio if and when the opportunity offers. Only if one has the definite creative urge and nothing else will satisfy, should one join the ‘free-lancers’ for their’s is one of the most heartbreaking jobs under the sun. Better by far get a teaching post and write a book than act as an unpaid research worker to the textile trade! To do stacks and stacks of designs in order to sell one, and to consign these stacks ultimately to the flames—can one imagine anything more terrible?³⁸

However, individuals such as R. D. Simpson present a more positive picture:

Twenty years ago I would have encouraged no one to specialise in textile design, but at present the prospect improves steadily. Design for textiles is now recognised to be of such importance that producers and education authorities alike are exerting great efforts to interest young people of culture and education and with artistic feeling to take up designing for fabrics as a profession.³⁹

Their background and interests may lie at the heart of Turnbull’s and Simpson’s views of the free-lance profession. Turnbull, in a managerial role within his firm, could be considered to have had a more realistic view of the designer’s prospects than Simpson, who was more narrowly concerned with design. Morton Sundour, for whom he was design director, continued a long tradition of buying designs from artists and free-lancers.

Textile companies, like Warner & Sons, had a reputation for producing high-quality fabrics with a percentage of output being devoted to experimental and ‘modern’ designs. Within firms like Warners, there were frequently individuals who were committed to design reform. Sir Ernest Goodale was a member of the Committee of Art and Industry, and Alec Hunter (Warners’ head designer) was a member of the Society of Industrial Artists. Morton Sundour included a number of individuals who were acting in, or sympathetic to, improvements in design and

industry; these included James Morton, R. D. Simpson, Alastair Morton (who headed the company’s subsidiary, Edinburgh Weavers), and Anthony Hunt who acted as buyer for Edinburgh Weavers and wrote extensively on textile design. It was, therefore, no surprise that such companies would wish to utilize hand-screen printing and encourage free-lancers, in particular artists, to provide designs for them. In this way manufacturers could produce a wide range of designs more economically than previously. With relatively little investment they could exploit the aesthetic possibilities associated with the new process and promote designs purchased from artist designers, which could provide them with valuable publicity.

The records of the textile companies studied indicate that in the 1930s, unlike previous decades, there were probably as many women designing textiles as there were men, but women’s participation differed in several crucial ways which have consequently had a bearing on the level of recognition they have received. Firstly, rather than being involved in the industry from within, as staff designers, it was more common for women to work as free-lance designers for several companies at a time. If they worked within the commercial design studio system they tended to remain anonymous, while it was usually the male head of the studio who was likely to be the individual who received any credit. For example, the products emanating from the studio of J. S. Wheelwright are always credited to him. Women who worked as free-lancers had to compete with male designers who had already gained recognition in other disciplines; it was usually these men that the journalists of the time (in such publications as *The Studio* and *Architectural Review*) concentrated on in their discussion of progressive textile design. Despite the opportunities provided by the development of the hand-screen printing process, women free-lance designers were still earning less than their male counterparts. The industry never outlined a policy as such, to pay less for the work of female designers. However, as women dominated the designs for hand-screen printing textiles (which afforded lower fees than for roller print design) they earned less than male designers who dominated the production of designs for the roller printing machine. Despite these differences, free-lance design provided a number of women, many of whom had been

trained as painters, with the opportunity to make a living through their creative talents. In many cases they could do this from their homes and thus avoid the less flexible and male-dominated commercial and factory studio.

The practice of buying a small percentage of patterns for prints of contemporary design from outside the factory studio had become established practice by the end of the 1930s. By the 1950s the textile industry continued to produce its own designs for weaves; however, in prints the situation had changed dramatically, as Michael Farr pointed out in his 1955 survey *Design in British Industry*:

In all the firms I visited the majority of the designs have been purchased from free-lance and commercial designers. Nevertheless, most firms maintain studios of their own, not only for creating new work, but for adapting the designs bought from outside artists.⁴⁰

While research is required to establish the relative proportions of women operating as free-lance textile designers in the post-war period, an examination of the current situation in textile company studios illustrates the striking change in the gender distribution of designers. The studios of most textile companies now tend to be dominated by female designers. For example, at Warner Fabrics all the design staff in the company's studio are women.⁴¹ Textile companies continue to purchase contemporary designs from outside sources, the majority of these coming from free-lance designers, with the bulk of printed designs now produced by a mechanized screen process.

The extent to which the textile industry as a whole was affected by the campaigns of design reformers has yet to receive detailed evaluation. However, the way in which hand-screen printing was utilized by a number of firms can be seen as a response to calls from reformers to 'improve' design. Hand-screen printing was ideally suited to the designs of individuals with little or no experience of designing for industry, such as craftworkers and fine artists. While these factors may well have provided an 'improving prospect' for some who wished to experience the flexibility of free-lance work, the extent to which one could earn an adequate living from such employment is more difficult to gauge. Although it would appear that hand-screen printing and free-lance design provided women with an important oppor-

tunity to design for industry, it may be that industry was the chief benefactor. Textile firms who wished to be counted amongst design reformers, who wanted to benefit from low-risk investment in new designs, and who saw an economic means of responding quickly to changing consumer demands had much to gain from the free-lance designer.

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Notes

- 1 R. D. Simpson, 'Textile design', *Journal of Careers*, February 1935, p. 89.
- 2 N. Pevsner, 'The designer in industry. 2. Furnishing textiles', *Architectural Review*, vol. 79, 1936, p. 2921. (During the research for this piece Pevsner was employed as a buyer for the London showroom of Gordon Russell Limited where he worked from 1935 to 1939; the shop was particularly successful as a retailer of modern furnishing fabrics.)
- 3 Ernest Goodale reported that it cost £100 to engrave each copper roller, and that in order to obtain a return on their outlay manufacturers had to print at least 5000 yards of fabric. E. Goodale, 'Design and manufacturer', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 4 April 1941, p. 286.
- 4 Captain W. Turnbull, 'The scope for the textile industry as a user of designs', *Journal of Careers*, February 1935, p. 91.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 British Institute of Industrial Art for the Committee on Industry and Trade Report, *Factors in Industrial and Commercial Efficiency* (Balfour Report), 1927, p. 344.
- 7 Pevsner, *op. cit.*, p. 291.
- 8 There is little information available as to the numbers of designers employed at any one time during this period; however, it is thought that Sandersons employed two people in the textile design studio, but between ten and fifteen in the wallpaper section, during the 1920s and 1930s; at G. P. & J. Baker two designers were employed at the beginning of the century although during the 1920s and 1930s the situation is unclear.
- 9 Pevsner, *op. cit.*, p. 292. (Pevsner does not tell us directly who 'the three most progressive manufacturers of furnishing fabrics' were, but at the end of the article he mentions Sir Frank Warner of Warner & Sons, Dr James Morton of Morton Sundour, and David and Frank Donald of Donald Brothers as 'initiators of the Modern Movement in the English textile industry', the implication being that they headed the most progressive manufacturers of the day.)

- 10 Board of Education, *Design and the Cotton Industry*, HMSO, 1929, p. 6.
- 11 A. Walton, 'Furnishing textiles', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 4 January 1935, p. 168.
- 12 Pevsner, op. cit., p. 292.
- 13 M. Rena, 'How textiles are made', *The Studio*, vol. 113, 1937, p. 92.
- 14 Ibid., p. 94.
- 15 K. Murray, 'The designer in industry: what is the prospect?', *Journal of Careers*, January 1935, p. 23.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Board of Education, op. cit., p. 11.
- 18 Ibid., p. 4.
- 19 S. Wainwright, 'Modern printed fabrics', *The Studio*, vol. 92, 1926, p. 398.
- 20 J. A. Milne, 'The artist in the textile industry', *Journal of the Textile Institute*, vol. XXIX, no. 6, 1934, p. 127.
- 21 A. Hunter, 'The craftsman and design in the textile industry', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 12 March 1948, p. 229.
- 22 E. Goodale, 'British and foreign upholstery fabrics: anomalies of the present situation', *Cabinet Maker and Complete House Furnisher*, 25 June 1938, p. 453.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 These figures are based on a study of the Dartford Print Record Books which list names of the block or screen printed designs produced (often included is a black and white photograph of the design), date of production, name of designer, a block or screen number as well as the number of screens or blocks used in the design, the price paid for the design, and the date the block or screen was destroyed. Also consulted were the Cretonne Design Books which include names of designs, designers, dates, and prices paid for roller print designs.
- 25 Albums of designs bought by Heals from a variety of textile manufacturers are available in the Victoria & Albert Museum's Archive of Art and Design, AAD 2/1978.
- 26 H. G. Hayes Marshall, *British Textile Designers Today*, F. Lewis, Leigh-on-Sea, 1939.
- 27 A. Callen, 'Sexual division of labour in the Arts and Crafts Movement', in J. Attfield and P. Kirkham (eds), *View From the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design*, The Women's Press, 1989.
- 28 M. Schoeser, *Marianne Straub*, The Design Council, 1984.
- 29 E. Lord, 'Eileen Hunter: textile designer', unpublished B.Sc.(Hons) Textile Design thesis, Huddersfield Polytechnic, 1984.
- 30 Minimum quantities for hand-block and hand-screen prints were considered to be between twenty and thirty yards, i.e. the length of the printing table.
- 31 Lord, op. cit.
- 32 C. Boydell, 'Women textile designers in the 1920s and 1930s: Marion Dorn, a case study', in *A View From the Interior*, op. cit.
- 33 Hayes Marshall, op. cit.
- 34 Archives of the following companies were studied: Warner Fabrics, Sandersons, G. P. & J. Baker, Edinburgh Weavers, Donald Brothers.
- 35 Warner Fabrics Archive: Dartford Print Record Books and the Cretonne Design Books.
- 36 The highest prices paid were determined by the complexity of the design as well as the reputation of the designer.
- 37 A. Hunt, 'The artist and the machine', *Decoration in the English Home*, January–March 1938, p. 30.
- 38 Turnbull, op. cit., p. 94.
- 39 R. D. Simpson, op. cit., p. 89.
- 40 M. Farr, *Design in British Industry: A Mid-Century Survey*, Cambridge University Press, 1955, p. 81.
- 41 My thanks to Alison Wylie (Warner Fabrics) for this information.