

The Stehli Silk Company Strikes Back – The Americana Series of the 1920s

By Megan Searing

Crazy about vintage clothing? When browsing – don't forget to look not only at the dress/blouse/skirt/scarf/coat etc. that you can't live without but also at the fabric out of which it's made. The fabric may, in fact, be more significant than the cut. Take, for instance, silks from the 1920s. American silk companies, along with many other United States industries, were criticized in the late teens and twenties for not offering more original, quality fabric designs. The consensus was that industrial arts in America were sorely lacking when compared to the French.



Stadium fabric possibly by Rene Clark

It's a well known fact that the United States did not exhibit at the International Exposition des Arts Decoratifs held in Paris in 1925. The U.S. government believed that as a country, the U.S. did not have anything to offer the world in terms of design or the decorative arts. This must have greatly irritated the leadership of many American silk companies as they were in direct competition with the French for their share of the silk market. Issues of the *American Silk Journal* from the early twenties, for instance, contained many articles which addressed the problem of lackluster, unoriginal American design.

In 1925, in response to this criticism, one business, The Stehli Silk Company, took matters into its own hands and commissioned several prominent American artists to produce silk designs for what they called the "Americana Series." The company, according to its promotional literature, "employed only first-rate artists, already successful and living the sophisticated life of their time, and hence capable of reflecting it in their work." This group of nationally known artists provided not only better quality designs than what Stehli had used before, but also lent name recognition to the endeavor. Names such as Neysa McMein, Clayton Knight, and later,

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John Held, Jr. were well known, and as such, were good for marketing the silks. Even the names of the fabrics themselves call to mind much of the flavor of the 1920s and what we now know inspired a great deal of art deco and modern design. For instance, in the series, Clayton Knight did "Manhattan," "Grand Canyon," and "The Jungle." Rene Clarke did "Jazz," "Revolt," and "Statistics." Ralph Barton did "My Trip Abroad" and "Tango Weed." Katharine Sturges did "Sargasso Sea," and "Plum Blossoms." Neysa McMein did "Hollywood," and Charles B. Falls did "Inca" and "Maya." The series must have been at least modestly successful, as the company went on to do two more series.

The publicity that the Stehli Silk Company received for all three Americana series, done in 1925, 1926 and 1927, respectively, was overwhelmingly positive and often mentioned both the male and female artists by name. An article in the trade magazine, *Silk*, claimed that the introduction of these specific silks would inspire fabric design both in the U.S. and abroad. The article also stated that the designs were artistically successful, partly because the "persons who created them are such ones who are constantly immersed in the stream of American civilization."

It is not hard to imagine that Stehli's "Americana Series" was widely discussed, as it was clearly exciting stuff in terms of the celebrity designers, catchy design names and the visual imagery itself. Though there are no corresponding images for some of the silk designs (check those attics and grandparents' closets, folks!) the ones that do exist are striking. Clayton Knight's "Manhattan," for instance, exhibits a striking geometric pattern created by loosely representational skyscrapers, a common Jazz age modern motif. The stylized buildings are interrupted by diagonal shafts of light suggestive of spotlight beams on a Broadway opening night.

Katharine Sturges, who at some point became Clayton Knight's wife, did a design called "Plum Blossoms" that depicts her version of the conventionalized flowers that were so popular in the 1920s. Interest in the arts of Asia was strong in the 1920s, as well, and Sturges studied Oriental art in Japan early in her career and was greatly influenced by it. The name "Plum Blossoms" reflects this as plum blossoms have traditionally been a common motif in Japanese art. Neysa McMein's design entitled "Hollywood" was no doubt as indicative of the era as these, but unfortunately her designs were not published with the others in advertisements and features, so we can't be sure unless a sample comes to light.

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Neysa McMein's artistic skill, however, can be seen in plenty of other places as she became a prolific illustrator in the 1920s and 1930s. She provides a good example of the kind of notoriety the artists involved in the series had achieved before they became involved in the project. By the time she did her first silk design for the Stehli Silk Company in 1925, she had established herself in New York City as a successful illustrator, well known for her images of pretty young women who adorned the covers of such magazines as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *McCall's*, as well as many of the advertisements inside the covers (see Palmolive ad).



Top and right: Lucky Strike and Palmolive ads by Neysa McMein. Bottom left: Postage stamp with likeness of Neysa McMein

According to one of her contemporaries, "...every taxi-cab driver, every salesgirl, every reader of columns, knew about the fabulous Neysa" at the height of her popularity. She was equally well known as a member of the Algonquin Round Table. McMein's studio served as a casual salon to which members of the Round Table went for entertainment, and judging by first hand accounts, there was never a dull moment. You may have seen her work featured in the American Illustrator series of U.S. Stamps. Both her artistic talent and her fast-paced, well-publicized personal life made her ideally suited to fulfill the design and marketing needs of the Stehli Silk Company.

The second Americana Series, probably introduced in the fall of 1926 is composed of designs by the same artists who did the first with a few additions. The most well-known addition was John Held, Jr. He is often credited with inventing the visual image of the flapper. According to an article in *The American Silk Journal*, Held "...has put into his work the humour which is characteristic of him and has reproduced a number known as Collegiate, which features the immortal Charleston in a little check design." It depicts an all over repetitive pattern of a suited figure performing the famous Jazz Age dance.

Another design from this series was called "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." It was by Ralph Barton, and depicted conventionalized groups of brunette

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women moving in one direction and groups of gentlemen wearing top hats following a single blonde woman. Barton illustrated Anita Loos' 1926 novel of the same name (see image). Like the Charleston, it was representational, but the figures have been abstracted and conventionalized, typical of much of the art of the 1920s.



Illustration by Ralph Barton
for Anita Loos' *Gentlemen
Prefer Blondes*

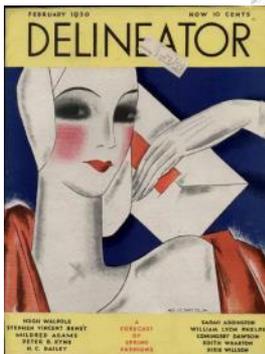


Warbirds by Clayton
Knight

Both Clayton Knight's "Manhattan" and Ralph Barton's, "My Trip Abroad," were continued from the first Americana series. Other titles from the second series include "War Birds" also by Clayton Knight (Knight had illustrated a book, *War Birds Diary of an Unknown Aviator*, in 1926 which, like Barton's work, probably inspired the fabric) and "Stadium" which may have been done by Rene Clark. The new artists, in addition to Held, were Edward A. Wilson, Helen Dryden and Ruzzie Green.

It was the third series of the Americana designs, however, that contained some of the most spirited and unconventional images. Included in this series were Ruzzie Green's "message prints" one of which featured the letters of the word "It," and the other the letters of the word "Cheerio." The word "It," used so often to describe the elusive quality possessed by Clara Bow, the famous Hollywood actress, is as indicative of the 1920s as skyscrapers and the Charleston.

Delineator cover illustrations
by Helen Dryden

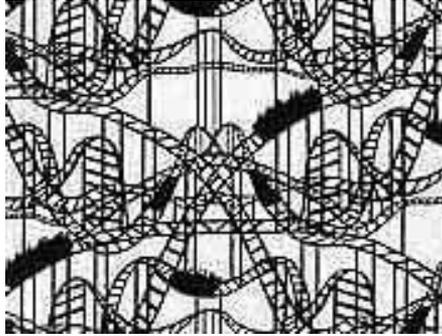


Katherine Sturges did "Tangle" for Series III and "a lovely (but unidentified) floral." Charles Buckner Falls, did "Ticker-tape." John Held, Jr. did "Rhapsody" which according to *Women's Wear Daily*, suggested the Gershwin song, "Rhapsody in Blue." Helen Dryden, did "Harvest" and Neysa McMein did "Chinese Legend." The continued success of the Americana Series again prompted the inclusion of

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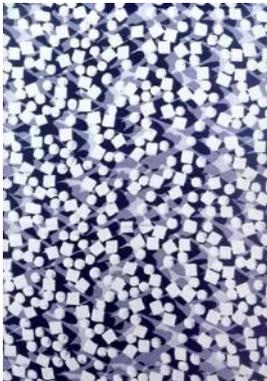
several new artists, F.V. Carpenter did "Gulls" and "Metropolis" and Dwight Taylor did "Thrill (see image)."



"Thrill" by Dwight Taylor

Photographer Edward Steichen was new to the third series as well. His experimental designs for fabrics using photographs of everyday objects such as sugar cubes, mothballs, and matches were well documented in a *Vogue* feature, "The Camera Works Out a New Theory of Design" (see image). The article stated that the idea of using a camera to create fabric design was

suggested to Steichen by the art director of the Stehli Silk Corporation, "who had, himself, experimented with the arrangement of such uninspiring things as bottles, cans, and poker chips." The truth of this statement is questionable, but what is important is that it underscored the Stehli Silk Corporation's willingness to experiment and try new things.



Fabric designs by Edward Steichen. Left: Mothballs and Sugar Cubes. Right: Matches.



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The *Vogue* article goes on to say that the designs were effective, would make good patterns for fabric and would be reproduced for spring silks. It stated as well that "they are undoubtedly the forerunners of a new school of industrial art." In many ways Steichen's designs were an ideal tool for Stehli. Designs for silks mechanically produced by a machine such as a camera symbolize an almost perfect union of art and industry. It would seem that the Stehli Silk Company's plan to improve its own and the American silk industry's design standards had, at least according to a source such as *Vogue*, succeeded.

It is difficult to discern how much of the popularity of the Americana Series was dependent on the artists-designers notoriety. But it is clear from articles such as "Stehli Puts Style into Harness" and "Art-directing the Marketing" that the company was counting on the names of the artists to be recognized and lend legitimacy to the endeavor. The company was clearly attempting to capture that elusive, nebulous notion of style. According to Kneeland Green, the art director, the company "decided that, whatever else, style should reflect good taste, good breeding, and smartness." Later, in discussing their advertising, he said that "although Stehli can boast nearly 100 years of leadership in the making of silk dress goods, none of the advertisements mention this. We wish to throw all the emphasis on our awareness of the demands of today." This indicates just how important it was to the company to present not only advertisements, but silk designs as well that were very much of the moment.

Stehli's promotional material boasted the following:

"Elegance. New weaves. New colors. The silks for 1928. Fabrics that carry out the promise of elegance--new and original, distinctly of the mode. Colors of bewildering versatility and charm--colors that reflect the spontaneity of Paris; the brilliance of modern New York."

It seems, in many ways that the company actually lived up to its advertising. The silks did offer the promise of elegance which was distinctly of the mode – as any lover of the art deco style could tell you upon gazing at the breathtaking fabrics. Unfortunately, they are now extremely rare and are for the most part tucked away in the storage areas of a very lucky few museums.

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It's also very hard to know how many of the designs were actually made into clothing. A search on the web did turn up at least one dress (see image). It features – “Tuesday Night at the Coconut Grove” by Ralph Barton. (This dress may appear in *Celebrity Caricature in America*, by Wendy Wick Reaves.)

Despite the silks' timeliness in subject matter, they were unusual and it would have taken a flapper with particular daring to be able to pull off a dress like this or an outfit featuring a silk with rollercoasters all over it. Some samples from some of the other silk companies in business at the time like Mallinson, for instance, were actually given to museums when they were first produced, no doubt in an effort to raise awareness that there was good design being produced in America.

Other examples have made their way into collections both public and private but are rarely seen because vintage fabrics can be extremely fragile and cannot survive being on display more than a few months at a time and then only if the lighting is dim enough to be harmless. There is hope, however.



Ralph Barton's design
“Tuesday Night at the
Coconut Grove” and a
dress made from the fabric

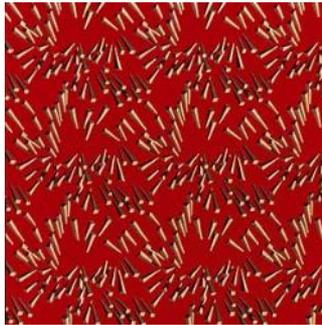
The Allentown Art Museum is collaborating with P&B textiles of California in the creation of “A Century of Progress” which is an art deco fabric line inspired by the Museum's textile collection. The Museum's website (<http://www.allentownartmuseum.org/gallery/textiles/P&B.htm>) notes that

“Over 500 colorful dress fabrics and scarves with images of the American Jazz Age are part of the Museum's textile collection. Ten of these '20s and '30s designs have inspired the A Century of Progress collection of printed fabrics introduced by P & B Textiles of California. The A Century of Progress collection is the first group of fabrics based on Art Deco designs by notable American artists

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such as John Held, Jr. and Walter Dorwin Teague. P & B Textiles has reproduced five designs by Teague with geometric patterns reflective of the Machine Age. Other designs include *Thrill*, a 1927 roller-coaster print, and John Held, Jr.'s *Rhapsody*, a design of orchestral jazz musicians inspired by George Gershwin's composition *Rhapsody In Blue*. A variety of colorways has been selected for each fabric design. Look for this unique collection in the Allentown Art Museum Store.”

The Allentown Art Museum mounted the exhibit *All That Jazz: Printed Fashion Silks of the '20s and '30s* in 1999, and published an accompanying catalogue (which is probably out of print) that would allow you to at least visually admire the beauty of the silks if not touch them! But none of this means that it's completely impossible that you could stumble across a sample, dress, or scarf with the letters IT all over it, or a swath of red covered with angular pegs. And if you do, you should certainly buy it!



“Pegs” by Charles B. Falls