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TEXTILES USA
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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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Five of the fabrics shown in the exhibition have also been used as floor coverings. These were provided by: Amerotron Corporation; Cohn-Hall-Marx Company; Herman Miller Furniture Company, Textile Div.; J. P. Stevens & Company, Inc. The fabrics were specially treated with Cyana® Soil Retardant by the American Cyanamid Company, and pasted to the floor with Dispersite D-524, a product of Naugatuck Chemical Division, United States Rubber Company. The following companies and individuals generously provided special assistance in preparing the exhibition: Ciba Company, Inc.; Ford Motor Company; Daniel Fuller; Hercules Protective Fabrics; Marie Nichola; Novik and Company, Inc.; Plymouth Cordage Company; Reeves Brothers, Inc.; Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Air Research Development Command, Fairborn, Ohio.
TEXTILES USA is one of a continuing series of exhibitions the Museum has devoted to well designed useful objects available to the public. Previous exhibitions, most notably those called Good Design, presented surveys of home furnishings which included textiles produced both in the United States and abroad. Textiles USA is the Museum's first exhibition devoted exclusively to contemporary American fabrics.

Both manufacturers and hand craftsmen were invited to send examples of their work produced during the last ten years to a jury appointed by the Museum. In making its selection the Museum was further assisted by advisors on technical aspects of performance and durability, where these criteria were relevant.

Regardless of the role played in the national textile economy by individual fabrics produced, often, in truly heroic quantity (10,085,937 yards of cotton yard goods in 1955) the selection of some 190 fabrics from the more than 3500 examined by the jury has been determined not by volume or salability, but by aesthetic value. Necessarily such an exhibition is limited in scope. It is not an exhaustive survey of all types of fabrics produced in the United States, and it omits certain indisputably excellent basic fabrics in favor of what is technically or aesthetically exceptional.

The exhibition has been organized within three categories of use: Home Furnishings, including upholstery and curtain materials but not carpets; Apparel; and Industrial fabrics, including such things as automobile tire cords, sludge filters, and insulating cloth.

Each category imposes a slightly different standard. Utilitarian requirements such as durability predominate in the industrial fabrics category, and are certainly of great importance in home furnishings, but they are obviously subordinate to the happily frivolous standards which by comparison obtain in apparel fabrics, where novelty is its own excuse. Nevertheless, such conventional standards as suitability of construction within the requirements of a given category, originality and quality of design, and variety and subtlety of color, were successfully met by all the fabrics selected for the exhibition.

If American textiles differ from those of other countries they do so, first of all, because of the sheer quantity in which they are produced and distributed. Daily our advertising celebrates in prose and song the advantages of maximum production and consumption. The development of the widest possible market has been an essential supporting condition for the techniques of mass manufacture, and the cheapness, availability, variety, and controlled improvement from year to year of our artifacts are indeed remarkable. Spurred by competition, these developments do more than give us an abundance of material goods; they are changing our ideas of cheapness, availability, variety, and improvement. Quantity can and does create a new conception of quality.

For example, in the United States the rich and the not rich may equally pride themselves on owning fabrics our grandfathers would have regarded as poor investments, because they will not last at least ten years. But the fact that our technological economy requires us to replace our possessions regularly, and that we enjoy doing so, has encouraged us to yield some aspects of quality in favor of others. Durability, for example, sometimes gives way to ease of maintenance. Thus we may regard as an improvement washable fabrics that dry quickly and need no ironing, as compared with fabrics that excel in other respects but also are more difficult to clean.
Today there is no single fabric that can be pointed to as the unique production of a particular state in the Union, depending on craftsmen of special skill and local tradition. Neither are certain fabrics used only in one part of the country for one purpose: blue denim is not confined to the ranch. New techniques of finishing enable textiles to borrow each other's attributes, but the blurring of regional and other distinctions has been accelerated most of all by the remarkable development since 1945 of synthetic fibers.

Corn cobs, coal, air, and petroleum, processed into fiber, now adorn our homes and persons. The high tensile strength and dimensional stability of these fibers have improved the performance of textiles in countless applications. Pure synthetics have often been made to imitate the textures of natural fibers, with some success, and when blended with wool, silk, or cotton the synthetics produce such a range of intermediate textures that even the expert has difficulty naming their contents. With few exceptions synthetics have not yet developed a distinctive visual and tactile character able to match the appeal, to most people, of organic fibers. Synthetics lack a quality of their own. But quality, in the sense of a thing being more like itself than like something else, of its being intensely unique, and pure, no longer describes the real virtues of modern textiles. "Pure" and "quality" are misleading terms when applied to just those areas of textile production in which some of the most important industrial innovations are at work; synthetics, for example.

If the craftsman's kind of variety, a virtue because it cannot be suppressed, is less in view, it is also true that a new kind of variety is evident. There are simply more kinds of textiles from which to choose than ever before, though it is true that much of this variety is imperceptible to the consumer and is exclusively the by-product of competition for his dollar. And mass production seems slowly to become more flexible. In this exhibition the product of the individual hand weaver in most cases will not be recognized because of its sensitivity to minute variations: the machine can achieve that, too. When he is not designing for machine production the craftsman is free to explore what now might properly be called "pure" textile design. Perhaps the most interesting example in the exhibition is the utterly useless reed and Velon fabric by Thelma Becherer. Fragile and curiously poetic, this work deserves to be admired in itself, like an ornamental vase.

Many industrial fabrics inadvertently heighten properties familiar to us in other materials. The blond opulence of loosely plaited tire cord, though it is always hidden within layers of rubber, rivals fabrics used for formal gowns. Day-Glo, a chemical treatment, makes color reflect with a new clang- ing, eye-splitting luminosity. Often such fabrics are eligible for other uses; the manufacturer of a sludge filter, resembling homespun, disposed of some extra yardage to a men's tailor. Industrial fabrics rarely if ever are designed for aesthetic effect, yet they seem beautiful largely because they share the precision, delicacy, pronounced texture, and exact repetition of detail characteristics of 20th century machine art.

Compared with achievements in the design of contemporary furniture and many other products, the textile industry as a whole has only begun to realize its own possibilities. But its contribution to design in the United States already is of major importance.  

ARTHUR DREXLER
TEXTILES have always been an indication of cultural values and achievements. The aggressive abstract designs woven in wool by the Peruvian Indians, the rich and formal patterns in cut velvet of the Italian Renaissance, and even the prim nosegay patterns of 19th century German Biedermeier all illustrate distinct cultural attitudes. The French farmers' cotton work clothes, for which Nimes was famous (de Nimes: denim) and the gold and silver vestments belonging to the Vatican, are textiles made for the most mundane and the most exalted moments of life.

This variety of motives is today served in the United States not by craftsmen but by a gigantic industrial effort. The textile industry comprises the producers of natural and synthetic fiber, the manufacturers who process fiber into woven goods, and the dyers, printers, and finishers who convert "gray goods" into the final, usable material. The enormous productivity of the industry makes it reportedly the fourth largest in the United States.

Like most of our artifacts, American textiles are influenced by contemporary painting and architecture. Modern architecture (itself influenced originally by the abstract painting of the Dutch Stijl group and the French Cubists) has provided a setting in which fabrics of traditional design are no longer satisfactory. More open interiors and the extensive use of glass have led to the development of a great variety of translucent fabrics for home furnishings. When these fabrics are intended primarily to subdue glare their beauty depends on the agreeable modulations of light produced by their construction and substance alone (115, 141). When a woven or printed pattern is added to this light-diffusing membrane, its scale and density interpose another element between indoors and outdoors, which must be related to other architectural elements in a room, including furniture (121, 125).

The sculptural qualities of many modern chairs are often seen most clearly when the taut skin of upholstery offers a single clear color or a strong texture (134, 146). With interiors devoid of traditional moldings and other decorative articulation textiles themselves become architectural elements in which texture has a new importance. Some textured fabrics strongly resemble the surfaces of building materials: striated sand (102, 111), rough earth (129) or the metallic glint of stone (131). Others supply brilliant color and bold geometric pattern (122, 123, 133), to contrast with subdued architectural backgrounds.

The abstract patterns of much modern painting have particularly influenced textile designers in their use of pattern and color. Flat areas of color without the illusion of depth, and an emphatically rhythmic use of geometric figures, often owe much of their effectiveness to the work of such painters as Paul Klee (117, 135) and Joan Miro (93), and, more recently, Jackson Pollock, (77, 97) and Franz Kline (65, 132).

Textiles for home furnishings, like our homes themselves, are expected to endure for a reasonable number of years. This consideration does not always influence the design of textiles for apparel. Fashion, indeed, is theatre on a personal day-to-day basis, and almost every deception is permitted. In the design of apparel textiles, unlike the other categories included in the exhibition, novelty in itself is desirable, although too often beautiful apparel fabrics disappear after a brief but too thorough exploitation. Much of this novelty is the result of technical innovations. Technology has enabled us to replace bulk with tensile strength, and a similar enthusiasm for the most economical use of materials is shared by many architects, de-
signers, and sculptors. Textiles made entirely or in part of synthetic fibers today achieve an unprecedented reduction of weight. Perhaps the most striking examples of this in the exhibition are Pacific Mills' *Pennyweight* (56) one of the lightest Dacron and wool fabrics made today, and Forstmann's wool crepe tweed (26) in which a light, almost transparent weave is made to look warm and bulky. Weight may also be eliminated through chemical treatment, as in Millium's coat lining of thin satin coated with metal for insulation (19). Color, when added to the liquid from which synthetic fibers are made, is an integral part of the fiber and is less subject to fading. Natural fibers have also benefited from research in the chemistry of color, and in turn our reactions to color have been heightened.

Synthetics, by themselves or mixed with natural fibers, have led to the manufacture of textiles which need little care, wash easily, dry fast and require little or no ironing. But natural fibers too have been greatly improved; our silks and cottons today are made in a variety of weights and textures never before possible. Cotton has perhaps benefited most from industry's continuous re-examination of performance characteristics. By now cotton may be considered our most important contribution quantitatively to 20th century textiles.

Many types of fabrics have entered into wider use. Cotton, for example, is no longer thought to be exclusively suited for work or country clothes, but is now used for year-round formal apparel. Commonplace but excellent fabrics like the Army's twill, and blue denim, have been "discovered" and made a part of our wardrobes to such an extent that they often identify the American traveling abroad.

Textile design, if it is to be more than a superficial pandering to fashion, requires sensitivity and an awareness of a contemporary language of vision as much as it requires a comprehension of materials and technology. It must also be guided by an intelligent understanding of the possibilities inherent in mass production, and the designer often has to function as a member of a team. For this reason many of the textiles in this exhibition are identified as company designs rather than as the work of an individual professional designer. Thomas (80) and Skillmill cottons (69) are both notable examples of the fine work that may be done in this way.

Individual craftsmen still excel in the attention to detail that provides one kind of quality in textiles. But the craftsman's chief contribution now appears to be in the design of fabrics for mass production. Only a very few craftsmen have succeeded in producing new work genuinely original and readily distinguished from that produced by industry. Examples are Thelma Becherer's Velon and reed screen (89) and Franklin Colvin's tapestry-like panel of nylon and mohair (96); both are exercises in pure design without utilitarian purpose.

To its credit, the textile industry has made available an enormous variety of fabrics in all price ranges. It has also improved the performance and consequently the pleasure we derive from textiles. But too often sales promotion leads manufacturers to abandon their best work for the sake of what is merely different. Textiles not more than a year old, selected for the exhibition, were in some cases no longer in production: a new season's output had replaced them. The textile industry in the United States has not yet learned to value its own accomplishments.

GRETA DANIEL
TEXTILES USA: EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

APPAREL


26 FORSTMANN WOOLEN COMPANY, Passaic, New Jersey
28 FRANK & STESSLE, INC., New York City
29 FULLER FABRICS CORPORATION, New York City
32 GALEY & LORD, New York City
35 GOODMAN & THEISE, INC., New York City
37 HANORA FABRICS COMPANY, INC., New York City
40 WILLIAM HELLER, INC., New York City
41 RIA HERLINGER FABRICS, INC., New York City
42 G. HIRSCH SONS, INC., New York City
43 LLOYD KIVA, Scottsdale, Arizona
44 M. LOWENSTEIN & SONS, INC., BONAFAB DIVISION, New York City
45 MAXWELL TEXTILE DIVISION, New York City
46 NATIONAL MALLINSON FABRICS CORPORATION, New York City
47a NATIVE LACES & TEXTILES, INC., New York City
48 NOVIK & COMPANY, INC., New York City
49b Thomas R. Elliott, 1953.
52 ONONDAGA SILK COMPANY, INC., New York City
56 PACIFIC MILLS, New York City
57 PELLON CORPORATION, New York City
59 PERSPECTIVES, INC., New York City
60 PRINCETON KNITTING MILLS, INC., New York City


HOME FURNISHINGS


INDUSTRIAL


165 Standard glass fabric. Taffeta weave. White. Used as reinforcing fabric for plastic boats, body armor plate, etc.


167 INDUSTRIAL RAYON CORPORATION, Cleveland, Ohio. Tire cord fabric. Tyron. Rayon. Used with rubber to form the plies of a tire. Also for drive and conveyor belts, etc.


171 PLYMOUTH CORDAGE COMPANY, Plymouth, Massachusetts. Cordage made from Reeves Brothers' polyethylene monofilament. 3-strand plied yarn rope in yellow and black; white and red. Company design.


175 Radar reflecting fabric. Metal foil over polyethylene core. Leno weave. For banner tow targets in aerial gunnery.


