

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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FOR RELEASE:
TUESDAY, AUGUST 28, 1956

PRESS PREVIEW:
DAILY NEWSPAPERS, MONDAY, AUGUST 27
MAGAZINES, TUESDAY, AUGUST 28
11 am - 4 pm both days

No. 80

TEXTILES U.S.A. OPENS AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

A delicate-looking mesh fabric used in radar targets, an opulent rayon "cloak" that is actually from the inside of a tire, brilliantly striped cotton and wool upholstery, faded blue denim and regulation Army twill, acetate jersey coated with 24 karat gold, handwoven tapestries and light dacrons, printed dress silks and combed cottons are among the 185 examples of American fabric designs on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from August 29 through November 4 in an exhibition, TEXTILES U.S.A.

The show, the first at the Museum devoted entirely to American textile design, was selected by a seven-member jury from more than 3500 entries. Aesthetic qualities of construction, color and design were the criteria by which fabrics were chosen in three categories: home furnishings, apparel and industrial uses.

Arthur Drexler, Director of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design, organized the exhibition. Greta Daniel, Associate Curator, was project director and Bernard Rudofsky, well-known architect, designed the installation in the Museum's first floor galleries and on the garden terrace. Many of the labels carry swatches and the legend "please touch."

Entrance to the exhibition is through screens of yellow and black polyethylene ropes strung from floor to ceiling. In the first gallery large geometric shapes covered with dozens of fabrics have been erected. A 23-foot diameter umbrella, tilted so that one edge rests on the floor, the other on the top of a curved wall, dominates the gallery. Placed around the floor are 12-foot high columns of fabric, and a "cloud" of fabric hovers above a pedestal.

Each of the 24 sections comprising the inside of the umbrella is covered with a different fabric, ranging from hot pinks and reds to cool blues and greens. Lavender cotton crêpe, brown and burgundy plaid dress cotton, striped hand-screened red and pink wool, double-woven check dress cotton, green printed drapery fabric, black taffeta and white ottoman are among the materials here that form a tremendous

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color wheel. The outside of the umbrella is covered with more subdued fabrics--men's suiting, subtle tweeds in browns, and grey and beige coating material.

Contrasting with this riot of colors, the curved wall which partially supports the umbrella displays 11 variations on the single theme of black and white patterns. Woven and printed wool, dacron, silk, and cotton, they include printed dress fabrics, wools and heavy cotton for draperies and slip covers, black silk screen prints, black line design on white cotton piqué, pure silk dress fabrics, and cotton and silk suiting materials.

Five columns, 12 feet tall, running from floor to ceiling have been placed in the rest of this gallery. On one, which has 16 triangular facets, 11 different fabrics have been pasted, including red hand-printed cotton, striped jersey on a white background, red corduroy, white satin. A 12-sided column displays beige wool, red felt, pink silk, and grey dacron, while a simple square column displays faded blue denim, regulation twill, red hopsacking and brown silk used for linings.

Black and white stretch jersey is wrapped around another column made of a pole and cross bars, so that the fabric is seen reacting to varying degrees of tension. A pure white toweling is shown next to a fabulously soft wool coat material crushed around a wire form to make a soft cloud.

Five of the fabrics shown in the exhibition are also used as floor coverings throughout the galleries. They have been chemically treated for this purpose.

Looking through the glass wall of this gallery, the visitor gets a glimpse of the industrial fabrics in the show on the terrace overlooking the Museum Garden. An awning of Herculite, a ~~nylon~~ ^{Fortisan} mesh laminated between clear plastic, runs the length of the terrace. At one end a section has been walled off by automobile convertible topping to enclose a curved free-standing wall which is covered with fibre-glass and luminous Day-Glo red sharkskin. On both sides of this wall are shown industrial fabrics such as a nylon flannel used in commercial laundries, a rayon mesh used in sanders and polishers, a Fortisan mesh used for marine hatch tents, felt used in blackboard erasers, glass fabric used in fiberglass boats, filtration cloth used in paper making, automotive fabrics, and a filament nylon fabric used in the manufacture of conveyor belts. A mannequin wears a great, wide robe of blond rayon--the inside of an automobile tire.

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At the other end of the terrace, two regulation air force parachutes are hung from the awning, one of magenta Day-Glo ribbons, the other of white and orange nylon.

Commenting on the industrial section of the exhibition, Arthur Drexler says: "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 clanging, 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 characteristic of 20th century machine art."

Returning to the exhibition galleries, the visitor passes through a long corridor hung with fabric from floor to ceiling. A small room off this gallery is devoted to handwoven tapestries, which are hung from the ceiling and on the walls. Here, using a variety of materials--fur, leather, velon, dried horsetails and cat-tails, banana bark and coconut cord--individual craftsmen have created some beautiful examples of pure textile design. "When he is not designing for machine production, the craftsman is free to explore what now might properly be called 'pure' textile design," Mr. Drexler says. "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."

The last gallery in the exhibition, at the end of the drapery-lined hall, is devoted to translucent, glittering, gold and silver fabrics. Two large light boxes form the entrance here. In these boxes translucent fabrics are shown with light alternately on and off, so that the visitor can see how they look with light behind them and in front of them. Beyond this is a pavilion of glitter. Panels of silver cloth, brocade, gold lamé, a shining fibreglass used in boat construction, and other metallic mesh fabrics form the walls of the room.

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Greta Daniel, Project Director, says about the exhibition, "Textiles have always been an indication of cultural values and achievements...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...The abstract patterns of much modern painting have particularly influenced textile designers in their use of pattern and color...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."

Commenting further on the exhibition, Arthur Drexler says that compared with achievement 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, he says.

He also points out in the catalog that the basis for selection of the fabrics was aesthetic value. 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 sale-ability, 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," Mr. Drexler continues.

"Each category imposes a slightly different standard," he goes on to say. "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 convention-

al 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."

Members of the jury, which met this spring to select the fabrics from 3500 entries, were René d'Harnoncourt, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, Arthur Drexler, Director of the Department of Architecture and Design, Philip C. Johnson, Architect and Chairman of the Museum's Committee on Architecture, William C. Segal, American Fabrics Magazine, Anni Albers, textile designer, Claire McCardell, fashion designer, and Mary Lewis, Fashion Director of Sears, Roebuck, and Co. Technical advisors were Ralph M. Gutekunst, Ann Mullany, Milton Rubin and Walter Scholer.

The exhibition is sponsored by 50 firms whose support was enlisted by an Industry Committee under the chairmanship of Daniel B. Fuller, President of D. B. Fuller and Co., Inc. It was initiated under the co-sponsorship of American Fabrics Magazine.

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Catalogs including a complete checklist, photographs, and additional background material available from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York 19, N. Y. Circle 5-8900.