Patterns and Lives of Hand Block-Printed Textiles: Creativity and Community in the Work of Twentieth-Century Women Designers

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Original scientific paper**

Within an environment increasingly dominated by mechanised, large-scale production, the interwar turn to hand printed textiles highlighted the aptness of textile surfaces to accommodate a straightforward application of modern art principles that, accompanied by a high level of craftsmanship, integrated the designer and maker. Created as both interior and dress fabrics, wood and linoleum block-printed textiles particularly exemplified the creative work of women who devised their designing and printing processes as inseparable activities through which unique and captivating engagements with textile patterns articulated an awareness for their quotidian and utilitarian functionality. In this sense, produced in independent and intimate workshop settings that affirmed the role of community and exchange in the development of design methodology, the fabrics allowed for an unmediated exploration of abstract compositions and figurative representations, encapsulating the simplicity of a traditional craft through the display of vivacious and innovative motifs. By examining the ability of hand printed textiles to transgress the boundaries between fine art and craft as well as to encompass aesthetic and functional qualities, the paper will situate the dynamic expressiveness of twentieth-century women designers within the experimental and embodied contexts of block-printing processes and position their activities at the intersection of individual and collaborative practices.

Keywords: *block-printed textiles; women designers; modernism; art; craft; handmade*

Izvorni znanstveni rad**

Uzorci i životni putevi tkanina ručno tiskanih blokovima: kreativnost i zajedništvo u radu ženskih dizajnerica dvadesetog stoljeća

Unutar okruženja sve više dominantne strojno tiskane proizvodnje velikih razmjera, međuratni zaokret k ručno tiskanom tekstilu naglasio je podobnost tekstilnih površina za izravnu primjenu načela moderne umjetnosti koja su, popraćena visokom razinom obrtničkog umijeća, integrirala uloge dizajnera i izrađivača. Osmišljene kao tekstil za interijer i odjeću, tkanine tiskane drvenim i linoleumskim blokovima osobito su se istaknule kao primjer kreativnog rada žena koje su procese dizajniranja i tiskanja osmislile kao neodvojive aktivnosti kroz koje su jedinstveno i intrigantno osmišljeni tekstilni uzorci artikulirali svijest o njihovoj svakodnevnoj i utilitarnoj funkcionalnosti. U tome smislu, proizvedene u neovisnom i prisnom okruženju radionica koje su potvrdile ulogu zajednice i razmjene ideja u razradi dizajnerske metodologije, navedene su tkanine omogućile neposredno istraživanje apstraktnih kompozicija i figurativnih prikaza, sažimajući jednostavnost tradicionalne tehnike u prikazu životnih i inovativnih motiva. Kako bi se istražila sposobnost ručno tiskanog tekstila za prelaženjem granica između likovne umjetnosti i umjetničkog obrta te za istodobnim obuhvaćanjem estetskih i funkcionalnih kvaliteta, rad će dinamične izraze ženskih dizajnerica dvadesetog stoljeća smjestiti unutar eksperimentalnih i utjelovljenih konteksta procesa tiskanja blokovima i pozicionirati njihove aktivnosti na razmeđe individualnih i kolektivnih praksi.

Ključne riječi: *tekstilni tisak blokovima; ženske dizajnerice; modernizam; umjetnost; obrt; ručna izrada*

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1. Integration of processes and creative control

Discussing the modern textile design movement in his 1926 essay, titled, *Modern English Textiles*, the painter and wood engraver Paul Nash (1889-1946) aligned its emergence with a renewed interest in the art of wood engraving [1] as a direct and straightforward practice with a "sculptural character" [2]. Conceptualised through the application of hand block-printing techniques, the textiles referred to by Nash represented the result of a more unmediated involvement with the designing and manufacturing processes. As such, their development during the 1920s materialised itself in contrast with the dominant, highly mechanised roller-printing technique that reflected the innovations of the nineteenth century and facilitated a high-volume production of fabrics through quick application of pattern. While British textiles continued to build on themes popular in the 1890s [3], during the years preceding the First World War, the exploration of the creative potential of block-printing by artists from continental Europe transgressed the boundaries between fine art and craft, re-evaluating the role of textiles as a valid medium for the interaction with modern aesthetic theories and stylistic orientations. Attributed to Japanese woodcuts and katagami, vernacular floral ornaments, and didactic publications on the simplification of natural forms into geometric ornaments [4], the colourful patterns of Wiener Werkstätte's block-printed fabrics influenced Paul Poiret (1879-1944) to establish Atelier Martine in 1911, combining the workshop's collaborative model and commitment to the elevation of applied arts with the aspiration to transpose its approach in an environment that stimulated unrestrained creative activity. In line with the current interest in non-Western art and folk art, Poiret employed young untrained women to create bold and naïve patterns and inspired by Raoul Dufy's (1877-1953) woodcut illustrations, commissioned the painter to produce a series of hand block-printed textiles that, arising from the aesthetics of Fauvism, in their simplicity and spontaneity continued to exhibit parallels with the artist's woodcut prints [5].

The forward-looking and radical approach articulated by the vivacity of block-printed and woven fabrics, rugs, and embroideries of the Omega Workshops, founded by Roger Fry (1866-1934) in 1913, reflected the art critic's enthusiasm for Post-Impressionism and the possibilities observed in Poiret's undertaking [5], as well as the intention to, as postulated by Fry in his preface to the Omega Workshops catalogue, "keep the spontaneous freshness of primitive or peasant work while satisfying the needs and expressing the feelings of the modern cultivated man" [6]. Although Fry praised the value of traditional handiwork and artistic creation of everyday objects over machine-made products, the Omega collective of fine artists delegated the production of their fabrics to outside manufacturers, leaving the wood block-printing to a company in France [7,8]. To this end, having ascribed the birth of the modern textile movement to the Omega Workshops, in order to resolve the disparate positions occupied by artists and craftsmen, Nash called for a heightened consideration of material aspects that accompanied artistic creation of artefacts, asserting as the ideal the practice of "the designer-craftsman or woman who makes only one bite at the cherry" [1]. Nash's ideas surrounding the achievements of small, independent textile workshops echoed the philosophies of the Arts and Crafts movement, its support for preindustrial working methods and unification of the designer and maker [9]. Nevertheless, having in mind that some of the first Arts and Crafts designers, including William Morris (1834-1896) who studied woodblock engraving as well as dyeing and printing of textiles, handed the execution of their creations to professional craftsmen and commercial firms, the 1920s craft movement, as pointed out by Tanya Harrod, with its strong preference for the most simple tools and direct processes and clear refrain from industrial modes of production, developed into a "narrower affair than the Arts and Crafts of the previous century" [10].

In his appreciation for the thorough nature of a "complete autographical" approach to textile design, Nash held the "work of a group of artists, all of them women, who design and engrave their own blocks and dye and print the material themselves" [11] in the highest regard, highlighting the achievements of Phyllis Barron (1890-1964) as the "ideal worker," along with those of Dorothy Larcher (1884-1952), and Enid Marx (1902-1998). Appearing within the context of modernism, as indicated by Deborah Cherry, revivals can be characterised by a variety of meanings, possibilities, and strategies. With their ability to express themselves through stylistic resurgences, preserved artefacts, or reintroduction of a "form of production such as craft" [12], revivals never repeat the past, but rather recontextualise it within a purpose that serves the present, often arising as tendencies deeply interlaced with discourses of authenticity and identity as a "mark of solidarity or a mark of resistance" [13]. The interwar revival of the traditional craft of hand block-printing represented the result of profoundly experimental endeavours in which these and other women engaged in a series of haptic processes accompanied by an increased attention to individual materialities surrounding the selection of tools, engagement with dyes, and

recognition of the potential of textile surfaces. As a result, their contribution to the visibility of the textile medium within the context of modernism elucidates an example of the reciprocity of dialogues between practice and discourse, as well as between the complexity of patterns that intertwined their artistic backgrounds. Unlike the commercial roller-printing technique that depended on the production and sales of substantial quantities of fabric to recover investments, hand block-printing represented a low-cost activity in terms of equipment, resources, and space, which, in addition to the advantage of overseeing the entire process and producing smaller volumes of adaptable designs, made the technique especially accessible to women. As a result, hand block-printed textiles reveal a distinctive capacity to illuminate personal circumstances of a number of women whose practices navigated the complexities of interwar and postwar environments - from Barron and Larcher as fine art graduates, to women who acquired skills in wood engraving at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, members of artistic collectives such as the Massachusetts-based Folly Cove Designers, and artists and "unskilled" workers who engaged with their social dimension under the Great Depression-era New Deal programmes.

2. Empirical methodology of block-printing

Approaches to hand block-printing developed by women designers offer invaluable insights into the vital role of authenticity and inventiveness imbued within the intricacies of their exploratory, artistic, and knowledge-making processes. Having received a collection of old wooden blocks while attending art classes in France in 1905, Phyllis Barron was enthusiastic to explore their application on textiles and acquire practical skills outside the scope of her formal education in painting obtained at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. According to Barron, the traditional art and craft dichotomy was strictly adhered to at the Slade and if she "had made any suggestions for anything like textile printing," she would have been "turned out at once" [14]. To this end, shortly before the First World War, Barron sought help from museums and consulted the Patent Office, where she located elaborate descriptions of ingredients and dye processes, and continued her research in libraries, discovering the scientific knowledge accumulated in late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century handbooks on the philosophy of permanent colour, dyeing, and calico printing. As outlined in her lively autobiographical lecture *My Life as a Block Printer* delivered at Dartington Hall in 1964, Barron learned by experimenting, showing a high level of persistence in her determination to master the technicalities of dyeing and block cutting [14]. Despite her initial failures, she managed to discharge indigo with nitric acid (Figure 1), achieve black by combining iron with oak gall solution as mordant, obtain brown from cutch, and rusty yellow from iron mould - a recipe discovered in a contemporary book on vegetable dyes written by the weaver Ethel Mairet (1872-1952). Using firewood, Barron structured her first wood block design, *Log*, in 1915 relying on the grain of the wood as the pattern and, in addition to wood and linoleum, continued to resort to printing with old French and Russian blocks, as well as with everyday objects such as corrugated cardboard, rubber matting, and pastry cutters [14]. Joined by the painter Dorothy Larcher in 1923, who had become acquainted with calico block-printing while living in India, Barron set a high standard of craftsmanship in the development of exquisite fabrics that appealed to a range of clients, including the affluent Hugh Grosvenor, second Duke of Westminster (1879-1953), who turned into one of the largest commissioners of their work.



Fig.1 *Scallop*. Hand block-printed length, blue and white linen, Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher, 1920s-1940s, T.74.242.a, From the Collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University of the Creative Arts

Personal narratives surrounding Barron's engagement with the practice highlight the importance of reorienting the focus from the finished object towards the productive process and, thereby, reading the creativity encapsulated in hand block-printed textiles "forwards," as argued by Tim Ingold in his essay *The Textility of Making* [15]. That is, to understand creativity as "improvisation" instead of "innovation," [16] approaching it as a generative activity in terms of which practitioners are "not so much imposing form on matter as bringing together

diverse materials and combining or redirecting their flow in the anticipation of what might emerge" [15]. In 1925, as part of their expanding studio practice, Barron and Larcher accepted Enid Marx into a year-long apprenticeship, whose abilities in wood engraving prepared her to master the skill of block cutting for textile design purposes. Trained as a painter at the Royal College of Art, Marx was a student of Nash and had previously studied calligraphy and textile design at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. In line with the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement and its first principal, the architect William R. Lethaby (1857-1931), the Central School supported the integration of design and production and played an important role in the interwar revival of wood engraving. Although the curriculum did not offer practical skills in block-printing [17], the teachings of Noel Rooke (1881-1953) encouraged a novel understanding of the autographical nature of wood engraving and interdependence of design and execution [18], which prompted some of its female students to apply their knowledge within the textile medium. Having trained both at the Central School and at the Slade, Elspeth Little (1898-1991) started conducting her first experiments at the Fraser, Trelevan and Wilkinson theatrical workshop in 1923, where she composed her patterns by means of stencilling and hand painting, using cold and hot water dyes, highlighting with ink, and engaging with the lengthy process of boiling saffron to produce yellow tones, before turning to wood and linoleum block-printing [19]. In 1926, encouraged by Nash, Little opened the shop Modern Textiles in the fashionable setting of Beauchamp Place, London, with the intention of selling handcrafted products and promoting artist-produced dress and furnishing fabrics of good design whose aesthetics and originality differentiated from the recurrent appearances of large-scale productions [20].

The Modern Textiles outlet was mainly supplied with textiles printed at the Footprints workshop, set up in 1925 by Little and her former co-worker Gwen Pike (1882-1929), a graduate of Birmingham Central School of Art, with the support of Celandine Kennington (1886-1975). In addition to patterns designed by Little and Pike, Footprints printed the works of fine artists such as Kennington's husband Eric Kennington (1888-1960) and Norman Wilkinson (1878-1971). The workshop employed female art students, including Joyce Clissold (1905-1982) who joined as a student of Rooke and in 1929, overtook its management turning it into a successful business. The name Footprints originated from the method of applying foot pressure on the blocks in order to transfer the designs onto the fabrics [21]. It particularly illuminated the performative aspect of block-printing, a slow and laborious process that, as described by Marx in her recollection of activities carried out in Barron and Larcher's workshop, consisted of multiple stages of stirring, washing, rinsing, and ironing [22] that needed to be completed before the cutting of blocks and transmission of designs, commonly executed by hitting the blocks with the handle end of a hammer (Fig.2).



Fig.2 Photograph of interior of Barron and Larcher's printing workshop at Hambutts House, Painswick, 1930s,
2003.52.16, From the Collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University of the Creative Arts

Among the series of embodied processes through which the designers engaged with the material world in order to construct the physicality of their block-printed surfaces, an approach similar to that of Footprints can be observed in the work of the Folly Cove Designers who, active as a predominantly female group in Gloucester, Massachusetts, between 1941 and 1969, developed a distinctive method of realising their marks by jumping on carved battleship linoleum (Fig.3).



Fig.3 Aino Clarke jumping on a block to transfer the print to fabric.
From the series "The Making of a Block Print," photograph by Gerda Peterich, 1948,
Image courtesy of the Cape Ann Museum Library & Archives, Gloucester, Massachusetts

Due to the physically demanding nature of the process, by the late 1940s, the collective turned to hand presses that enabled them to evenly exert pressure and ensure a high-quality impression of inked designs. Founded by the children's book author and illustrator Virginia Lee Burton Demetrios (1909-1968) on the ground of a neighbourly exchange of design and music lessons, the Folly Cove Designers represented a diverse group consisting of artists, working-class women, and housewives without prior artistic training, all brought together by a desire to articulate their creative expression within the framework of community [23]. Similar to other designers who situated their hand block-printing practices within their living spaces, adjacent premises, or small-sized workshops, the Folly Cove members generated their textiles in the home, in kitchens, basements, and barns, thereby effectively negotiating the boundaries between household, child-rearing, and creative activities within a decisively personal and domestic environment.

3. Structure, consumption, and visibility of hand block-printed textiles

With their Neo-Primitivist features, the textiles of Barron, Larcher, and Marx appeared in disparity with the refined and more formal fabrics of the Arts and Crafts movement [10]. The reliance on natural dyes, both in terms of positive printing and discharge methods, resulted in predominantly monochromatic designs of subtle colours, while their imperfect, mottled texture achieved by thickening the dye with gum enhanced the distinctive modernist aesthetic conceived through skilful arrangement of repeating patterns. The two volumes of samples assembled by Barron and her friend, the etcher and printmaker Robin Tanner (1904-1988) preserved at the Crafts Study Centre in Farnham represent an invaluable archival resource that reconstructs the history of Barron and Larcher's work by providing descriptions of methods, dyes, tools, and materials used in the creation of individual motifs as well as detailed insights into the stages and varieties of their execution. With the exception of overprinting and intricate application of multiple blocks, Barron and Larcher printed their designs with a single block on grounds such as cotton and linen, silk, velvet, organdie, and wool. Functional in nature, their fabrics served practical needs and were sewn into shawls, garments, cushions, upholstery, and curtains developed for, among others, the Senior Common Room at Girton College, Winchester Cathedral choir stalls, and Historical Society in Chelsea [14]. Although a preference for abstract geometric forms can be observed in Barron's original experiments and Larcher's first blocks, *Old Flower* and *Basket*, reveal an inclination towards naturalistic shapes, the majority of chronologically compiled works omits the attribution of authorship, uncovering instead, as stressed by Tanner, a "harmony of attitude" [24]. Having learned through observation, Marx developed a similar preference for vegetable dyes and mineral colours of mottled texture. Working from her own studio since 1927, she found inspiration in Cubist and Surrealist painting and was further influenced by non-Western textiles, such as bark cloth fabrics from the Pacific Islands exhibited at the British Museum [22]. Constructed through overall less fluid patterns, the compositions of Marx frequently direct the focus towards the individual block and thereby achieve a more fragmented appearance, often combined with heightened contrasts between light and dark, particularly prominent in the designer's iron prints executed on linen (Fig.4).

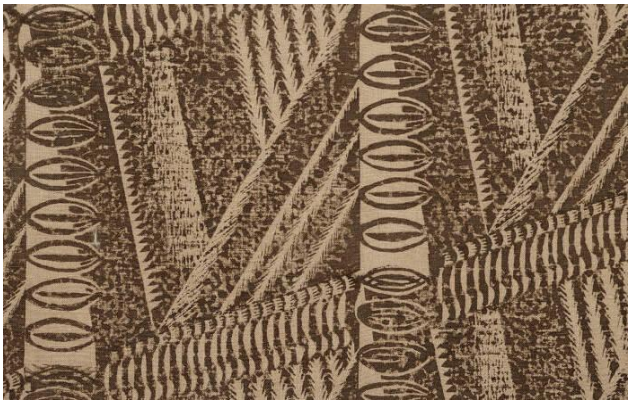

Fig.4 *Underground*. Block-printed textile sample, brown and natural, Positive print in iron on galled linen, Enid Marx, 1930s, TS.76.9, From the Collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University of the Creative Arts

Placed within the broader context of social and economic structures, the utilitarian biographies [25] of hand block-printed textiles articulate their consumption in relation to the expressions of status and taste [26]. As handmade products imbued with immediacy and expertise, their unique character perceived in opposition to mechanically produced fabrics led to their dissemination through direct commissions as well as through retail spaces that enabled consumers to access artefacts distinguished by a high standard of production. The entrepreneurial spirit of Modern Textiles exemplified an avenue that accompanied interconnected networks of female production and provided a space for the circulation of goods among a wealthy and forward-thinking clientele with an appreciation for the aesthetic sensibilities of modern art. Along with ceramics,

wallpaper, and other handmade textiles, the shop sold the works of Barron, Larcher, and Marx, fabrics printed by Little in the adjoining studio, and designs carried out by Footprints, which during the 1930s opened two separate shops offering their clients, such as actresses Yvonne Arnaud (1890-1958) and Gracie Fields (1898-1979), the possibility to buy scarves, shawls, gowns, jackets, or order custom-made fabrics and garments [19,20]. Moving away from the predominant abstract language, with their repetition of stylised narrative themes featuring landscapes, architectural, and floral motifs, the patterns constructed by Clissold stand out in terms of representational imagery and expanded palette of strong and vibrant colours. Achieved through the use of aniline dyes, their detailed handwritten recipes, accompanied by imaginative titles such as *Pale Bunny Brown, Holy Ghost Blue,* or *Winter Sunshine* and at times even assigned to individual garments, can be found within the two dye books donated along with fabric samples as part of Clissold's personal archive to the Central Saint Martins Museum and Study Collection [27,28]. Although Barron's designs caught the attention of Fry, she declined the invitation to join the Omega Workshops [14] and increased the visibility of her work by exhibiting at venues that promoted the "high" arts such as the Mayor Gallery and Zwemmer Gallery, where a work of Marx, titled, *Wangle*, accompanied the display of a sycamore wood sculpture *Mother and Child* (1931) by Henry Moore (1898-1986) [10], thus asserting the inextricable relationship between the textile medium and fine art.

In the United States, Chicago became one of the most important centres of the American Arts and Crafts movement that, oriented towards well-designed utilitarian goods, aspired to promote its idealist paradigms by means of philanthropic initiatives such as the Hull House founded in 1889 with the initial purpose of enabling the acquisition of craft skills for those in economically unfavourable circumstances [29]. Established in 1935 in response to the Great Depression under the auspices of Franklin D. Roosevelt's (1882-1945) Works Progress Administration, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project provided employment for women unable to qualify for other programmes due to a lack of occupational training or work experience. Under the supervision of Elsa Ulbricht (1885-1980), who had trained in art education at the Pratt Institute in New York and obtained an art degree from the Milwaukee State Teachers College [30], the Wisconsin project encompassed 11 work units, manufacturing books, rugs, weavings, appliqués, costumes, dolls, wooden and cloth toys, furniture, block-printed and screen-printed textiles - each led by a senior art student or graduate with the task of designing artefacts and instructing workers [31]. Ulbricht required the predominantly female "designer-foremen" to maintain flexibility with regard to the experimental nature of tasks and the entire project. In terms of block-printed textiles, this included the creation of preliminary designs, preparation and cutting of wood and linoleum blocks, mixing of oil-based inks, and transfer of designs onto fabrics using rubber or wooden mallets and presses for larger blocks (Fig.5) [32].



Fig.5 Relief printing on textiles, Milwaukee Handicraft Project, Works Progress Administration (WPA), 1935-1943, uwmmss59_B02_F09_P058_a, Elsa E. Ulbricht Papers (1905-1978), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries

Despite the use of "primitive methods" that could be performed by a broad range of workers with limited skillsets [33], the artefacts needed to encompass a high standard of design and craftsmanship and elevate public taste in useful, everyday objects designated for tax-supported institutions. In this sense, having studied bookbinding at Hull House [31] and spent summers at the Saugatuck Summer School of Painting in Michigan, which was founded and attended by Chicago artists [34], Ulbricht's pedagogical principles and inclination towards the social implications of good design reflected the ideas of the Arts and Crafts movement. Until its closure in 1943, the project supplied numerous schools, hospitals, nurseries, and orphanages in Wisconsin and other states, whereby its fabrics were developed by paying attention to the purpose of each institution and taking into account their suitability for various age groups and educational levels [32]. Created through the application of a single block or complex alignments of several blocks, the hand printed curtains and wall hangings exhibited colourful children's themes that, imbued with a sense for the collective identity of the nation, showcased recognisable features such as indigenous motifs, regional birds, trees, and animals

(Fig.6), as well as quotidian and agricultural narratives in line with the revived interest in folk art and vernacular traditions which during the economically challenging times, as affirmed by Jane S. Becker, mirrored "a way of life that did not rely on material wealth" [35].



Fig.6 Motifs. Milwaukee Handicraft Project, Works Progress Administration (WPA), 1935-1936, 1992.001.08, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries

4. Women and collaborative work

Pictorial interpretations of local and regional subject matter occupied a strong presence within the works of the Folly Cove Designers. Through the interplay of positive and negative space and rhythmicity of size variations, the group members experimented with horizontal, vertical, and diagonal multiplication of imagery derived from everyday activities and the surrounding natural environment, including plants, animals, sea life, and birds (Fig.7).

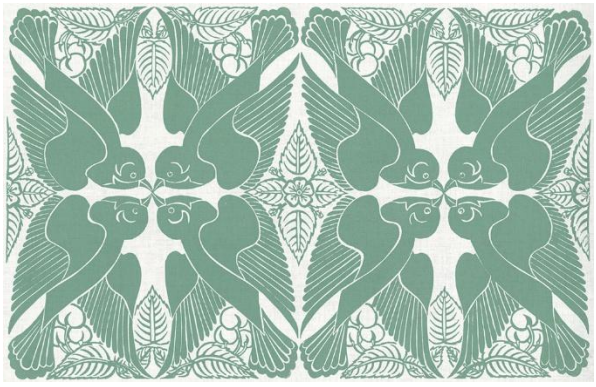

Fig.7 *Round Robin*. Linoleum block print, Ink on cotton, Eleanor Curtis (1910-2008), 1954, Collection of the Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, MA

Located on Cape Ann northeast of Boston, the first Arts and Crafts centre in the United States with a particularly strong focus on book printing, the Gloucester neighbourhoods, including Folly Cove, developed into a location that, in addition to late-nineteenth-century immigration from Finland, attracted numerous artists and affluent families from the city. Although the Folly Cove Designers emerged from different social backgrounds and conceived their designs independently through annual group classes mentored by Demetrios, their block-printed artefacts materialised the collective processes of knowledge making and skill sharing, interlacing a strong cohesive identity with personal and artistic development. As part of its longevity, the group navigated the demands of everyday gender roles and domestic responsibilities and realised a nation-wide interest in their dress and interior fabrics by balancing contracts with commercial firms and male-dominated business environments with a truthfulness to their initial standards, additionally maintained through the establishment of an independent retail and exhibition space [36]. Addressing the ability of craft practices to define community and contribute to the formation of group identity outside the notion of tradition, in their introduction to *Craft, Community, and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19th-20th Century*, Janice Helland, Beverly Lemire, and Alena Buis highlight the importance of understanding communities not as "stagnant, homogeneous groupings but rather dynamic, fluid groups of people and things, organising and regrouping at various times and places" [37]. Constructed within the context of an economic crisis as one of the few racially integrated programmes, the community formed throughout the Milwaukee Handicraft Project facilitated a vehicle for social engagement and interconnected artists and "unskilled" women, women of different races, and immigrant women with limited knowledge of English language. The social bonds forged through inventive and collaborative work ensured the successful reputation of the programme whose handmade objects, including block-printed textiles, uplifted the morale and confidence of women through the acquisition of productive skills and meaningful impact on the wider community.

In their overview of the complexity of interrelations between art, craft, and design, Grace Lees-Maffei and Linda Sandino situate their shifting boundaries and nuances of manifestation in relation to the material and visual conceptualisations of objects by makers and discourses surrounding their reception [38]. Formally trained as a painter, Phyllis Barron exhibited a curiosity to position materials and making at the centre of her artistic practice which guided her towards the establishment of powerful amicable

relations that remained interwoven with her handcrafted textiles. Determined to uncover the principles of vegetable dyeing, Barron developed a strong bond with Ethel Mairet who encouraged her to start selling and publicly exhibiting her fabrics. This opened up the door for a large commission executed for the interior of Duke of Westminster's yacht and facilitated the introduction to Dorothy Larcher, which resulted in a lifelong partnership [14]. In addition to addressing "improvisational creativity" as a generative process and ongoing performative interaction with the material world, Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam stress the importance of seeing creativity as "relational" in terms of its dependency on "the total matrix of relations in which it is embedded and into which it extends" [16]. By allowing individual development to occur "through the presence and activities of others" [16], the impact of the relational aspect of creativity can be particularly observed in hand block-printing practices, constituted either as collaborative efforts or established through explorations situated within a network of social and independent entrepreneurial connections. The restricted supplies and closure of retail spaces caused by the outbreak of the Second World War brought an end to hand block-printing production in Britain leading some women, such as Barron and Larcher, never to resume the technique. Nevertheless, their creativity affected the textiles of Susan Bosence (1913-1996) who was introduced to their fabrics while working as the headmaster's secretary at Dartington Hall, a progressive educational centre with an emphasis on arts and crafts. Bosence set up her experimental workshop and visited the designers in the early 1950s, gaining extensive first-hand insights into their experience with traditional processes. In addition to linoleum block-printing, she went on to develop her own elaborate technique through a combination of over-printing, wax, paste, and stitch resist dyeing. Bosence demonstrated an awareness for the textured qualities of cloth which she shared along with her methodlogy in her 1985 book, titled, *Hand Block Printing & Resist Dyeing*, pointing out that "a method is neither creative nor uncreative: it is the artist's mind that creates" [39]. Combining her practice with teaching at the Dartington School and Adult Education Centre, Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in London, and West Surrey College of Art and Design in Farnham in the 1960s and 1970s, Bosence worked within the domestic environment and found inspiration for her fabrics in the surrounding countryside. Relying, in particular, on modern Caledon and Soledon vat dyes, fixed with sulphuric acid to obtain bright and fast printing tones, she structured her small-scaled spotted and striped designs into subtle, abstract patterns interwoven with delicate, individually conceived

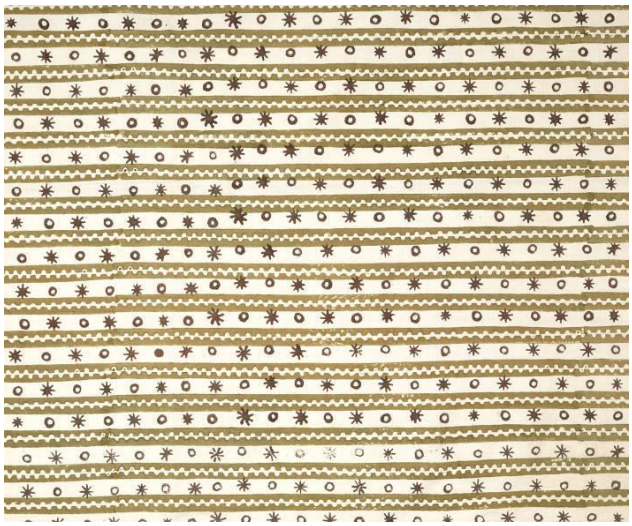

Fig.8 Positive print in yellow-green, Length with linoleum block print, Susan Bosence, 1950s-1960s, T.75.16.b, Collections of the Crafts Study Centre, University of the Creative Arts

circles, diamonds, and stars (Fig.8) devised for interchangeable use depending on the desire of the customer [40].

Having engaged in pedagogical work at the Central School from 1936 to 1940, Joyce Clissold resumed block-printing after the war and continued with the practice until the 1980s, although to a limited extent. Initially concerned about the lack of control in industrial production [22], starting from 1937, Enid Marx redirected her pattern-making skills towards the creation of upholstery fabrics for the London Underground, achieving the status of Royal Designer for Industry in 1944. The extent of women's involvement with both the craft and industrial sphere of design during the interwar period highlighted its notion as a field in which the "feminine point of view" was perceived as beneficial for an increased consumption of mass-produced artefacts [41]. The gradual exploration of the hand screen-printing technique as a quicker alternative to block-printing and a relatively inexpensive commercial medium for artistic experimentation provided viable prospects for women as freelance industrial designers - even though such collaborations might have, ultimately, been more favourable for the industry [42]. These opportunities continued to arise after the war with a new generation of graduates from the Royal College of Art which tightened the relationship between fine art and screen-printed textiles, particularly evident in parallels with Abstract Expressionism exhibited in Shirley Craven's (b. 1934) designs for Hull Traders. Working for the company as both designer and art director, Craven, however, occupied a unique position within the industry that allowed for significantly more creative freedom and control over the pro-

duction of her work [43]. To this end, the autographical approach to textile design praised by Nash and the distinctive immediacy and straightforwardness of hand block-printing remain summed up in the sample book of Susan Bosence's textiles compiled for the Crafts Study Centre by Anne Hinkins in 1995. Reflecting on Bosence's work as a process that did not rely on preliminary drawings and their subsequent transfer onto fabrics, in the essay, titled, *The Work is Part of Life,* textile historian Deryn O'Connor distinguished her approach from the division of labour observed between the work of freelance or studio-based designers and the men who handled the printing process - "what happens between her hands and the piece of cloth is the action of designing" [40].

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