

TRACING WIENER WERKSTÄTTE TEXTILES

Viennese Textiles from the Cotsen
Textile Traces Study Collection

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Marie-Eve Celio-Scheurer (Eds.)

Birkhäuser



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Figure 58 Maria Likarz-Strauss, *Asunta*, 1929, silk, plain weave, block printed, 27.9 × 16.5 cm, Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection, Inv. no. T-0193.175

Bright Colors, Stylized Flowers: Notes on *Asunta*, a Fabric Pattern by Maria Likarz-Strauss

Lisa Cornali

The quality and stylistic richness of the fabric patterns of Maria Likarz-Strauss (1893–1971) are often emphasized in literature about the Wiener Werkstätte (WW). Through her activity in several departments of the company, but in particular through her work for the textile and fashion divisions, Likarz emerged as one of the most influential female artists of the WW. From her studies at the k. k. Kunstgewerbeschule (Imperial Royal Arts and Crafts School) in Vienna (1911–16) to the company's closure in 1932, she designed more than two hundred textile patterns—about 15 percent of the more than 1,320 fabric designs created by the WW—which were highly valued for their versatility.¹

In this regard, the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Center (CTTSC) holds a representative collection of Likarz's productions. Thirty-seven samples exemplify nineteen motifs created between 1910 and 1929. They thus cover almost all her activity for the Textile Department and offer an excellent overview of her main stylistic orientations. Early on, Likarz developed geometric and abstract patterns—as in *Athos*, *Marmon*, or the famous *Ireland* (Ireland)—but also numerous motifs characterized by increasingly stylized vegetal elements—like *Gräser* (Grasses) or *Menorea*.² Designs such as *Basel* and *Rhodesia* attest to Likarz's ability to combine stylized plant forms with strong geometric structures.³ Reflecting the variety of her designs, the CTTSC perfectly documents Likarz's creativity and contrasting styles. The juxtaposition

of these samples also hints at the profusion and diversity of her sources of inspiration, whether ancient or contemporary, European or non-European.⁴

The CTTSC features two fragments of the design *Asunta*: one printed on silk [Figure 58], the other on cotton [Figure 59]. This design stands out due to its large, bright, and colorful floral motifs, outlined with a black line. Created by Maria Likarz in 1929, the design *Asunta* is well known as it is believed to be printed on a kimono worn by Marlene Dietrich in the film *Der blaue Engel / The Blue Angel*. Surprisingly, no specific research has ever been conducted on this design.⁵ This paper seeks to shed some light on its possible sources of inspiration and examine some of its practical applications in fashion and interiors.

Japanese Tendencies and Other Possible Sources of Inspiration

A preparatory work on paper by Likarz makes it possible to grasp *Asunta* in its totality [Figure 60]. Round and angular flowers and leaves of various scales stand out against a plain background. They are scattered without symmetry over the entire surface, as if randomly arranged. The forms are highly stylized; one can distinguish several kinds of flowers, but it would be hard to identify real species. No modeling, shading, or chromatic variation suggests any volume. Thus, these planar forms are not articulated in three dimensions, but according to a principle of plane-layering. These characteristics call for a comparison with Japanese formal language, the importance of which is well known for the artistic, decorative, and clothing development in Europe between the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the interwar period.⁶

Literature on the WW regularly mentions the crucial phenomenon of Japonisme to the evolution of the company's formal vocabulary, but mainly in general terms and without going beyond the 1910s, focusing mainly on Japanese stimuli in the works of Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956) and Koloman Moser (1868–1918).⁷ Likarz's work has been little and only recently considered in relation to the Japanese formal language.⁸ *Asunta* represents a perfect case study of this inspiration that could have been drawn from *katagami*.

These finely cut paper stencils used to print on fabric were, from the last years of the nineteenth century, set up as models, as “formal treasure,”⁹ for the European applied and fine arts, where they informed the shaping of floral patterns in particular.¹⁰ It is now thoroughly documented that Hoffmann often employed them in his teaching at the Arts and Crafts School in Vienna: according to him, *katagami* made it possible to grasp the form itself in order to develop a proper ornamental language.¹¹ As a student of Hoffmann, Likarz must have used them in the 1910s and remembered them in her work for the WW, where the theoretical precepts of the Arts and Crafts School were applied in commercial practice.¹²

Hoffmann possessed his own collection of *katagami* but may also have used the ones preserved in the k. k. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie (Imperial Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry), today the MAK—Museum of Applied Arts, which already housed the extensive Japanese collection gathered by Heinrich von Siebold (1852–1908).¹³ Several *katagami* from this collection are reminiscent of *Asunta*, where Likarz does not aim to achieve a mimetic representation of flowers, but rather generic, stylized forms. Specifically, the large, angular yellow flowers of *Asunta* evoke the inner petals of the plum blossoms of the *katagami* reproduced in figure 61, while the many little blooms are strikingly similar to those shown in figure 62. As in the stencil in figure 61 or in other examples, Likarz pairs massive forms with numerous small floral elements, seemingly randomly distributed across the fabric. As in these Japanese stencils, *Asunta*’s flowers overlap and appear to float against a uniform black background. As is often the case in Likarz’s designs, the overlapping conveys a sense of depth, but without generating three-dimensionality, a general characteristic of *katagami* that Hoffmann seems to have emphasized in his teaching.¹⁴

However, Likarz’s work with *katagami* as a student does not guarantee a reference as late as 1929. The link with Japanese ornaments is more obvious in her pattern *Timur*,¹⁵ as it clearly refers to the Japanese motif *seigaiha*, which symbolizes the “waves of the blue sea.” Likarz could have noticed it in a *katagami* held in the Siebold collection and perhaps



Figure 59 Maria Likarz-Strauss, *Asunta*, 1929,
cotton, plain weave, block printed, 27.9 × 19.1 cm,
Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection,
Inv. no. T-0193.174



Figure 61 *Katagami*, Japan, mid-nineteenth century, paper stencil, 24.2 × 41.8 cm, MAK (Siebold Collection), Vienna, Inv. no. OR 3925-2003



Figure 62 *Katagami*, Japan, mid-nineteenth century, paper stencil, 21 × 38.8 cm, MAK (Siebold Collection), Vienna, Inv. no. OR 3925-4960



Figure 63 Maria Likarz-Strauss, *Ballets russes*, 1912, color lithograph, 14 × 9 cm, Leonard A. Lauder Collection, Neue Galerie New York

even in the form of printed textiles kept in Vienna's Museum of Ethnology (today's Weltmuseum).¹⁶ As *Timur* was designed in 1929, the same year as *Asunta*, it proves at least that Likarz was dealing with Japanese ornaments in the late 1920s. Given that Likarz may also have observed the *seigaiha* pattern on Japanese clothing and prints, both extremely popular in Europe at the time,¹⁷ it is also very likely that Japanese prints were another source of inspiration for *Asunta*, especially regarding its graphic and chromatic aspects. Breaking with illusionism, Likarz actually depicts forms with large areas of flat and luminous tints that she outlines with a fine and continuous black line, a process not very common in her work.¹⁸

Graphic, chromatic, and formal treatment in *Asunta* and in Japanese *katagami* and prints offer clear similarities, but a spatial characteristic of Likarz's design departs from the Japanese ornamental aesthetic. The surface of *Asunta* is indeed saturated with a dense and relatively messy pattern, which may have been inspired by the costumes of the famous Ballets Russes who were then performing throughout Europe.¹⁹ Likarz had been familiar with them since 1912, when she designed a series of postcards for the WW entitled *Ballets russes*. One of them depicts a figure dressed in pants crowded with floral patterns [Figure 63].²⁰

At the time, the folk art of Central and Eastern Europe aroused renewed interest and was a source of inspiration for the company. Furthermore, Angela Völker has pointed out its importance for the evolution of the textiles of the WW toward a less geometric style.²¹ Likarz studied samples of folk art in Rosalia Rothansl's class at the Arts and Crafts School and this inspiration is visible in motifs she developed in the 1920s such as *Rebhuhn* (Partridge) (1924), which was produced and sold until 1929.²² Therefore, European folk art may have been more of an inspiration for the spatial density of *Asunta* than the Japanese visual vocabulary.

However, the Japanese inspiration for *Asunta* seems to remain the most prevalent and likely. Throughout the 1920s, the WW sought to overcome their financial difficulties, caused in particular by high production costs. One way to achieve this goal was to adapt textile production more closely to the market,²³ and fabrics with Japanese tendencies were intended to

respond to the European taste for Far Eastern style in interiors and women's fashion during the interwar period. In the early 1920s, Likarz thus designed chinoiseries to adorn the walls of the Kaiserbar (Imperial Bar) in Vienna.²⁴ In 1928, she sketched several carnival costumes, including ornaments and forms of the traditional Japanese clothing,²⁵ thus probably responding to public demand of the day.

Other designers in the Textile Department of the WW also appropriated formal Japanese language. In the 1920s, Josef Hoffmann and Felice Rix-Ueno (1893–1967) were important mediators of Japanese forms in the European visual lexicon.²⁶ Established in Kyoto in 1925, Rix-Ueno produced many textiles with floral motifs clearly based on the Japanese formal vocabulary, particularly on *katagami*, such as *Almira* (1929) and *Anemone* (1927) [Figure 18].²⁷ These may also have inspired *Asunta*, developed during the same years. While Likarz features stylized flowers in her fabric patterns from the beginning of her career, the dimensions of *Asunta* are characteristic of her motifs of the second half of the 1920s. Her textile designs *Fidelio* [Figure 25] and *Verona* (1924) show that the small graphic vegetal patterns did indeed give way to larger forms; these two motifs remained successfully on sale until 1929–30.²⁸ Thus, the large scale of *Asunta* must have satisfied a demand—in addition to requiring a less demanding production process—for Likarz's colleagues designed similar patterns. Rix-Ueno's *Almira* and *Anemone* are prime examples of this trend.

Delicacy and Versatility:

Some Practical Applications of *Asunta*

Asunta fabric appears to have been sold essentially by the meter until 1930.²⁹ Few objects or garments using this fabric have been documented or preserved. A sketch for a carnival costume, a cushion project,³⁰ and four pieces of an incomplete dress [Figure 64] kept at the MAK make it clear that *Asunta* could be adapted to both interior decoration and fashion. While, according to Angela Völker, textiles fulfilled a less important role in the interiors of the 1920s than in the 1910s,³¹ these documents illustrate the versatility of Likarz's designs. The dress fragments also reveal a detail that neither the two

samples from the CTTSC nor the preparatory works on paper can show, i.e., the motif was printed in two slightly different arrangements and orientations: on the left side of the skirt, the blue petal of the large yellow flower points to the left and is placed just below the fuchsia petal, while on the right side of the skirt the same blue petal pattern pointing in the same direction is placed above the fuchsia petal. This difference is not due to a rotation of the printing blocks or to an axial symmetry resulting from the printing mechanism, but is inherent in the pattern.³² These subtle variations must have involved two sets of wooden blocks to print such a fabric, for a total of fourteen to sixteen blocks, depending on the colors chosen.

The most famous object made of *Asunta* is undoubtedly a kimono kept at the Deutsche Kinemathek (German film archive) in Berlin [Figure 65] and said to be the kimono worn by Marlene Dietrich in the renowned German movie *Der blaue Engel* / *The Blue Angel*, shot in the fall of 1929. Although the actress does not wear it in the film, it has been claimed that it appears in the background of Lola Lola's dressing room. The catalog of the exhibition *Die UFA. Geschichte einer Marke / Ufa: The History of a Brand* held at the Deutsche Kinemathek (2017–18) seems to be the source of this idea, as it juxtaposes a still of the set of *The Blue Angel* with a photograph of the Berlin kimono.³³ However, on more minute inspection, the black-edged sleeves and patterns of the negligee appearing in the still have no equivalent in *Asunta*.

The Berlin kimono remains mysterious in many ways. Its label only indicates it was made by the Berlin company Theaterkunst, founded in 1907 and specializing in the designing, making, and renting out of costumes for the film industry.³⁴ The archives of the Deutsche Kinemathek and Theaterkunst in Berlin and the Theater Studies Collection of the University of Cologne do not seem to hold any documents providing additional specifics about the ordering and manufacturing of this garment.³⁵ Moreover, the genesis of *The Blue Angel* and the circumstances of the casting and the shoot remain very nebulous even today³⁶ and sources diverge on the identity of the costume designer. Nevertheless, all costumes seem to match the aesthetic intended by Viennese director Josef von Sternberg (1894–1969). Sternberg saturates the image of his



Figure 64 WW, four pieces of a skirt and top part made from the fabric *Asunta* by Maria Likarz-Strauss, ca. 1930, silk, block printed, MAK, Vienna, Inv. no. T 11568



Figure 65 Kimono made from the fabric *Asunta* by Maria Likarz-Strauss, 1929, silk, block printed, 140 × 147 cm, Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin, Inv. no. TX-50227

movie, filling each space with materials, textures, a whole jumble of objects, posters, garments, and mirrors.³⁷ With its dense pattern, the *Asunta* kimono would have fit perfectly into this ensemble. It therefore seems likely that it was produced for the movie, without being used in it. Theaterkunst must have received the order for it and bought the fabric indicated by the client.³⁸ The opening of the WW branch in Berlin, on October 30, 1929, coincided with the shooting of *The Blue Angel* and may have encouraged the choice of a pattern designed by the Austrian company. On this occasion, the *Vossische Zeitung* reported that Likarz's printed silks were among the most highly regarded textiles of the WW.³⁹ Sold in the capital since 1910, WW textiles were, in fact, very popular in Germany.⁴⁰

In any case, the Deutsche Kinemathek kimono is a fascinating example of the way Japanese inspirations were appropriated in interwar European fashions and the role Far Eastern art played in the development of a new female figure. A deeper inquiry could analyze how the form of the kimono was combined with a textile pattern itself probably inspired by Japanese formal language through artistic cooperation between various players, including the WW and, of course, Maria Likarz-Strauss.

- 1 For Maria Likarz's life, education, and activity at the Wiener Werkstätte, see Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Anne-Katrin Rossberg, and Elisabeth Schmuttermeier, eds., *Die Frauen der Wiener Werkstätte / Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte* (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2020), 239–40. For her activity as a textile designer, see in order of priority: Angela Völker, "... Doubtlessly all exceptionally gifted girls ...: Textiles by the Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte," in Thun-Hohenstein, Rossberg, and Schmuttermeier, *Die Frauen*, 105, 107; Angela Völker, "Fashion, Textiles, and Wallpaper," in *Wiener Werkstätte, 1903–1932: The Luxury of Beauty*, ed. Christian Witt-Döring and Janis Staggs (Munich, London, and New York: Prestel, 2017), 294, 304; Angela Völker, *Die Stoffe der Wiener Werkstätte 1910–1932* (Vienna: Brandstätter, 2004), 49, 162, 175–77; Sabine Waitzbauer, "Maria Likarz (1893–1971), eine Künstlerin der Wiener Werkstätte. Die Entwicklung ihres Stoffdesigns in den 1920er Jahren" (MA thesis, University of Kiel, 2007), 1, 28–38.
- 2 See CTTSC, Inv. no. T-0193.154 (*Athos*); T-0193.177 (*Marron*); T-0193.144 (*Irland*); T-0193.145 (*Gräser*); T-0193.162 (*Menorea*).
- 3 See CTTSC, Inv. no. T-0193.149 (*Basel*); T-0193.152 (*Rhodesia*).
- 4 Waitzbauer, "Maria Likarz," 39 et seq. offers a good overview of Likarz's entire textile creation, with a focus on the 1920s.
- 5 See Völker, *Die Stoffe*, 235, cat. no. 555. *Asunta* is referred to in Waitzbauer, "Maria Likarz," 63–65.
- 6 The literature dedicated to Japonisme in Europe is extensive. For Japonisme in Austria and Vienna, see in particular: Mirjam Dénes et al., eds., *Japonisme in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy* (Budapest: Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asian Arts, 2020); Johannes Wieninger and Akiko Mabuchi, eds., *Japonisme in Vienna* (Tokyo: Tokyo Shimbun, 1994); Peter Pantzer and Johannes Wieninger, eds., *Verborgene Impressionen. Japonismus in Wien 1870–1930* (Vienna: Seitenberg, 1990).
- 7 Marie-Eve Celio-Scheurer, "When Motion Blurs Boundaries: Made in Vienna, Made in Japan," in *The Newsletter 89* (Summer 2021) and Verena Sander, "Felice 'Lizzi' Rix-Ueno: Der Japonismus kehrt heim" (MA thesis, Vienna University of Technology, 2018) depart from this bias.
- 8 Agnes Schwanzer, "Japonismus in den Wiener Werkstätten Textilien" (term paper, University of Vienna, 2020), 3, 5–8.
- 9 According to the title of the publication of Friedrich Deneken, ed., *Japanische Motive für Flächenverzierung—ein Formenschatz für das Kunstgewerbe* (Berlin: J. Becker, 1897).
- 10 Johannes Wieninger, "Katagami et art viennois," in *Katagami: Les pochoirs japonais et le japonisme* (Paris: Maison de la Culture du Japon, 2006), 27. The parallel between *katagami* and the applied arts at the WW is also specifically addressed in Schwanzer, "Japonismus" and in Tomoko Kakuyama, "Katagami—Japanese Paper Stencils and Their Role in Vienna Workshops: A Research on the Siebold Collection in MAK," in *International Association of Societies of Design Research* (Seoul, October 18–22, 2009), 2019–28.
- 11 Wieninger, "Katagami," 28 et seq.; Johannes Wieninger, "The Other Art of Nerves: Japanese Arts and Vienna around the Year 1900," in Pantzer and Wieninger, *Verborgene Impressionen*, 57–62.
- 12 Elisabeth Kreuzhuber, "Limited Opportunity, Seized with Both Hands: Women Artists or the Wiener Werkstätte at the School of Arts and Crafts," in Thun-Hohenstein, Rossberg, and Schmuttermeier, *Die Frauen*, 27.
- 13 For Heinrich von Siebold and his collection, of which more than eight thousand Japanese stencils are now kept at the MAK: Wieninger, "Katagami," 29; Johannes Wieninger, "Japan in Vienna: Japanese Art in the Viennese Collections and Exhibitions around 1900," in Pantzer and Wieninger, *Verborgene Impressionen*, 43–47. See also Kaori Hidaka and Bettina Zorn, *Japan zur Meiji-Zeit. Die Sammlung Heinrich von Siebold* (Vienna: KHM-Museumsverband, 2020).
- 14 Wieninger, "Other Art of Nerves," 61.
- 15 See CTTSC, Inv. no. T-0193.274.
- 16 MAK, Inv. no. 3925-1926; Weltmuseum, see Inv. no. 32917.
- 17 MAK, Inv. no. KI 8327-9. In addition to the literature already cited on Japonisme, see Estelle Niklès van Osselt, ed., *Asia Chic: The Influence of Japanese and Chinese Textiles on the Fashions of the Roaring Twenties* (Geneva/Milan: Fondation Baur/5 Continents, 2019); Iwao Nagasaki and Aurélie Samuel, eds., *Kimono: Au bonheur des dames* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017); Anna Jackson, ed., *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* (London: V&A Publishing, 2020).
- 18 The MAK keeps many fragments of *Asunta* in various colors: Inv. nos. WWBW 13 and WWS 52-1.
- 19 Völker, "Fashion, Textiles, and Wallpaper," 270.
- 20 Elisabeth Schmuttermeier and Christian Witt-Döring, eds., *Postcards of the Wiener Werkstätte: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 270, no. 883.
- 21 Völker, "Doubtlessly," 105.

- 22 Waitzbauer, "Maria Likarz," 59–60. For Rosalia Rothansl's collection of folkloristic textiles, see the essay by Eva Marie Klimpel in this volume, pp. 89–104.
- 23 Waitzbauer, "Maria Likarz," 15, 48.
- 24 Likarz's estate kept at the MAK contains a photograph of the Yellow Room of the Kaiserbar from 1925 (Inv. no. NL/ML 39), as well as several preparatory drawings and sketches (e.g., Inv. nos. NL/ML 40/1; NL/ML 40/2; NL/ML 129/4; NL/ML 129/12; NL/ML 129/26). I am grateful to Régine Bonnefoit for providing me with this information.
- 25 The MAK keeps three carnival costume projects (Inv. nos. KI 12329-22, KI 12329-23, WVE 279). For costume design by the Fashion Department of the WW, see Lara Steinhäuser, "By Women for Women: On the Role of Female Fashion Artists at the Wiener Werkstätte," in Thun-Hohenstein, Rossberg, and Schmuttermeier, *Die Frauen*, 129.
- 26 Wieninger, "Katagami," 31; Johannes Wieninger, "The Significance of Japanese Stencils for Vienna ca. 1900," *MAK/ZINE 2* (2012): 61.
- 27 The MAK keeps Rix's preparatory drawing for *Almira* (Inv. no. KI 12895-2) and *Anemone* (Inv. no. KI 12897-2). Schwanzer ("Japonismus," 6–7) compares *Almira* more closely with *katagami* and prints. For Rix-Ueno and her links with Japan, see Celio-Scheurer, "When Motion Blurs," and Sander, "Felice 'Lizzi' Rix-Ueno."
- 28 Waitzbauer, "Maria Likarz," 61–63.
- 29 According to the index card of the pattern, kept at the MAK (Inv. no. WWKA 3187).
- 30 MAK, Inv. nos. KI 12334-31, WWSP 1679, WWSP 1765. For Likarz's cushion projects see Völker, "Doubtlessly," 97.
- 31 Völker, *Die Stoffe*, 108.
- 32 I am grateful to Marie-Eve Celio-Scheurer for our inspiring discussions on this subject.
- 33 Peter Mänz, Rainer Rother, and Klaudia Wick, *Die UFA. Geschichte einer Marke* (Bielefeld, Berlin: Kerber, 2017), 87.
- 34 Heike Stange, "Das Unternehmen Theaterkunst," in *Filmkostüme! Das Unternehmen Theaterkunst*, ed. Deutsche Kinemathek—Museum für Film und Fernsehen / Museum der Arbeit (Bönen, Germany: Kettler, 2007), 8.
- 35 My thanks to Charlene Fündgens (Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne), Silke Ronneburg, Barbara Schröter (Marlene Dietrich Collection, Berlin, and Textile Archive, Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin), and Dorothée Uhrmacher (Artistic Director, Theaterkunst GmbH, Berlin) for their help.
- 36 On this topic, see John Baxter, "Berlin Year Zero: The Making of 'The Blue Angel,'" *Journal of Cinema and Media* 51, no. 1 (2010): 164–89.
- 37 See Baxter, "Berlin Year Zero," 178–79: the costumes are sometimes attributed to Hungarian Tihamer Varady or to Karl-Ludwig Holub, of whom nothing is known today. See also: Susan Ingram and Katrina Sark, *Berliner Chic: A Locational History of Berlin Fashion* (Bristol, UK, and Chicago: Intellect / University of Chicago Press, 2011), 121; Sybil DelGaudio, *Dressing the Part: Sternberg, Dietrich, and Costume* (Rutherford, London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press / Associated University Press, 1993), 16.
- 38 A report in the *Filmkurier* (1924) describes the normal procedure for the production of a costume by the firm: see Stange, "Das Unternehmen Theaterkunst," 11–12.
- 39 M.O., "Wiener Werkstätte in Berlin," *Vossische Zeitung*, October 31, 1929, 3.
- 40 The WW has always had an intense relationship with the German market: see Völker, "Fashion, Textiles, and Wallpaper," 260.

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