

Town and Country Made: The Custom Dress Designs of Ethel Wallace, 1930-1955

Michael Mamp, Central Michigan University, USA

Keywords: Ethel Wallace, batik, dresses, history

Ethel Wallace (1885-1968) was a twentieth century artist who achieved great success with textiles and paintings (figure 1). Her batik panels and portraits of famous women of the first half of the century such as opera singer Eva Gauthier and socialite Mary Hoyt Wyborg were celebrated, published, and widely exhibited.¹ Thus far, research regarding Wallace has documented that between 1913 and 1931 her batik work was exhibited via sixteen different venues both nationally and internationally including: the Philadelphia Art Alliance, the Arts Guilds Galleries of New York, the Dallas Art Association (which later became the Dallas Museum of Art), the Leicester Galleries of London, as well as the private studio of Gertrude Whitney. However, after Wallace's New York City studio was destroyed in a fire, she moved permanently to rural New Hope, Pennsylvania, where her artistic output diminished. Ultimately, Wallace disappeared from the international art scene and died in relative obscurity and poverty in 1968. The researcher's work thus far has focused on the documentation of Wallace's early paintings and batiks.



Figure 1 Ethel Wallace photographed by Arnold Genthe in front of a batik of her creation, 1925.

However, new information has emerged regarding Wallace's mid career in New Hope, PA via the acquisition of her personal papers.² This cache of primary data allowed for the reconstruction of previously missing details regarding Wallace's mid life/career and has been mostly unavailable for research since her death in 1968. Wallace saved diaries, poetry, fashion illustrations, receipts, newspaper and magazine clippings, correspondence and various ephemera. Over the past ten months, these items were painstakingly cataloged and organized by category, chronologically where possible. Via application of the historical method, the story of a woman who reinvented her herself as a local, and all albeit rural couturier emerged.

¹ For examples of the exhibition of Wallace's batik work see: "12th Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture by the Members of the Club." *The Whitney Studio Club*. The Whitney Galleries, 1927; Dallas Museum of Art. *2nd Annual American and European Art Exhibition at the Adolphus Hotel in the Junior Ballroom*. 1921; WG Bodoïn, "Batik Exhibition at Bush Terminal Sales Building." *The Evening World*, August 8, 1919; WG Bodoïn, "Members Exhibit at the Whitney Studio Club." *The Evening World*, April 12, 1922; and Ruth DeRochement, "Art." *Vogue*, July 1, 1921:63.

² Made possible via the estate of the late Barbara Kristina Johnson, Princeton, NJ.

After Wallace left New York, she established a custom eveningwear business that flourished from c. 1930-1955. Her records reveal a cache of hand-illustrated designs that she presented to clients (figure 2). These designs were either drawn to order or shown as examples that could then be altered to meet the needs of each woman. Working with a specialty short run manufacturer in New York City, whom Wallace addressed as Mr. Leon, she created stunning ensembles that reflected predominant styles of the 1930's, through the mid 1950's. Her hand copies of correspondence with Mr. Leon documented all stages of construction and embellishment for each dress. Wallace executed hundreds of custom pieces over a period of approximately twenty-five years. Her letters to Mr. Leon offer a glimpse into the business and character of this female entrepreneur. Wallace managed the production of her custom designs from afar via correspondence and periodic shipments of muslins, sketches, and embellishment samples. Although New Hope, PA is relatively near to New York City, Wallace preferred not to travel. This did at times complicate her business with long lead times and missing packages but according to Wallace this was to be expected in the process of "...town and country made."³



Figure 2: Illustration of eveningwear design by Ethel Wallace with beading and embroidery c. 1954.

This research further reveals the work of this artist and designer who is all but forgotten, but also provides a glimpse into the lives of Wallace's clients. Her clients included debutantes preparing for debuts, brides and bridal parties, and women in general who wanted something unique for a special event. She described two of her younger debs for Mr. Leon, "These girls return from Europe in late August. I must fit their dresses then for I'll not see them again until Christmas."⁴ Wallace also designed gowns for the Queens of Mardi Gras in New Orleans throughout the early 1950s. She again worked from a distance, made but only one trip to New Orleans for a final fitting, and communicated on one such occasion to Mr. Leon, "she will be a Queen and it will not be easy, she is a very large girl."⁵

Wallace effectively translated her training and experience as a painter and textile artist into an entrepreneurial, grass roots, fashion design career. This presentation will explore the story of this female artist, and now documented fashion designer, which through the passage of time, and inaccessibility of information, would otherwise be lost.

³ Ethel Wallace papers, letter to Mr. Leon, c. 1950.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.