

# TEXTILES IN THE CONTEXT OF XX-XXI CENTURIES ABSTRACT ART

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## **Resumen**

El comienzo del siglo XX fue la época de desarrollo del llamado “arte abstracto”. Normalmente, cuando se explora el arte abstracto, se recurre a la pintura. Los historiadores del arte del siglo XX observaron la conexión entre la creciente importancia de las artes decorativas y aplicadas y el florecimiento de la abstracción en la pintura. Un campo tan importante de las artes aplicadas como el de los textiles artísticos no fue considerado en absoluto en este contexto.

## **Palabras clave**

Arte textil | arte abstracto | arte contemporáneo | textiles contemporáneos.

## **Abstract**

The beginning of the twentieth century was the time of development of the so-called “abstract art”. Usually, when exploring abstract art, they turn to paintings. Art historians of the twentieth century noted the connection between the growing importance of decorative and applied art and the flourishing of abstraction in painting. Such a significant field of applied art as artistic textiles was not considered in this context at all.

## **Keywords**

Textile art | abstract art | contemporary art | contemporary textiles.

Traditionally, in the history of Western European art, decorative and applied art was usually given a secondary role.

The beginning of the twentieth century was the time of development of the so-called “abstract art”. Usually, when exploring abstract art, they turn to paintings. Such a significant field of applied art as artistic textiles was not considered in this context at all. Researchers of abstract painting have noted that the flat expressiveness of abstract painting is largely related to the flatness of ornamented textile surfaces. However, the idea of a possible “textile” origin of abstract painting was too radical for art historians - it was believed that painting, called “optical” art, represents a more advanced state of human perception, hierarchically superior to the “tactile” art of textiles. However, modern researchers call the art of textiles one of the important factors that played a role in the history of abstract art.

In 2013 – 2014, the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg of art hosted the exhibition “Art & Textiles”. The purpose of the exhibition was to explore the role of textiles in the history of art from the modern period to the present. It was noted that the links between fine and applied art are obvious. In addition, which is especially important for this research, the exhibition “Art and Textiles” paid special attention to the exit of textile art from the plane of the picture to the area of space.

Subsequently, there was a change in the concept of textile art. In the second half of the twentieth century, during the so-called “plastic explosion”, new forms of textiles appeared, they went from the plane to the volume, from the field of abstract painting to the field of abstract sculpture.

In this article, we are going to see the evolution of this historical process.

Discussing the issues of terminology in the field of artistic creativity, the famous Russian philosopher and cultural critic Moisey Kagan noted the existence of such concepts as “decorative art” and “applied art”. The researcher did not consider the concepts of “decorative” art to be successful, since the concept of decorativeness did not reflect the unity of the utilitarian and artistic aspects. While the term “applied art” quite accurately characterizes the dual nature of this group of arts, the combination of artistic and vital-practical, utilitarian principles in them, while simultaneously emphasizing the priority and overriding importance of the second<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Kagan M.S. O prikladnom iskusstve: Nekotorye viprosy teorii. Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1961 – P. 31-32

The primacy of utilitarianism probably contributed to the fact that in the history of Western European art, applied art was usually given a secondary role. Actually, architecture, painting and sculpture were considered “big” and real art. Applied art, called “small” or “low”. It was associated with the creation of functional items – fabrics, dishes, furniture and, thus, the line between the concepts of “craft” and “applied art” was not clearly defined. The failure of this hierarchy of arts has been noted by many researchers. Thus, Gottfried Semper, art theorist of XIX century, speaking about the use of the term “applied art”, noted, that this phrase ... quite accurately reflects the abnormal situation in modern art, thanks to which a deep gap has been formed between the so-called high and low art<sup>2</sup>...

In the XIX century, in connection with the development of industry, there was a crisis of craft production. Unique items began to be replaced by mass-produced products that were inferior in their aesthetic qualities to objects created manually.

The emergence of the “Arts and Crafts Movement”, associated with the names of William Morris and John Ruskin, can be considered a reaction to this state of things. W. Morris noted the importance of applied art in the history of mankind and saw the reflection of this history in the contemporary artistic situation: “... no people and no society, even the most primitive, could not do without these arts...”<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, W. Morris noted that all these arts are now in a state of anarchy and disarray. And this clearly dictates the need for fundamental changes. These changes W. Morris and his associates saw in the appeal to the principles of medieval craft<sup>4</sup>. The activity of William Morris largely contributed to the rise of applied art.

The beginning of the XX century was the time of development of the so-called “abstract art”. Usually, when exploring abstract art, they turn to paintings. Art historians of the XX century noted the connection between the growing importance of applied art and the flourishing of abstraction in painting. For example, Peg Weiss noted that this issue requires serious scientific attention<sup>5</sup>. Such a significant field of applied art as artistic tex-

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2. Semper G. *Practicheskaya estetika*. Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1970. – P. 177.

3. Morris W. *Iskusstvo I zhizn. Izbrannye stat'i, lektsii, rechi, pis'ma*. Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1973 – P. 248

4. Morris W. *Iskusstvo I zhizn. Izbrannye stat'i, lektsii, rechi, pis'ma*. Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1973 – P.251

5. Weiss P. *Kandinsky in Munich: The Formative Jugendstil Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979 - P. 9.

tiles was not considered in this context at all. Researchers of abstract painting have noted that the flat expressiveness of abstract painting is largely related to the flatness of ornamented textile surfaces. However, the idea of a possible “textile” origin of abstract painting was too radical for art historians and art critics. It was believed that painting, called “optical” art, represents a more advanced state of human perception, hierarchically superior to the “tactile” art of textiles. In the works of the XX century devoted to abstract art, works of artistic textiles are almost not mentioned. However, modern researchers call the art of textiles one of the important factors that played a role in the history of abstract art and pay attention to the connection between textiles and abstract painting. There are four concepts of interaction between textiles and abstract art:

- textile is a kind of model or paradigm for abstraction, and it was at the origin of the formation of modern abstract art;

- the opposite view – the intensive development of textile art throughout the XX century was closely linked to the theories and forms emanating from the dominant artistic direction in painting and sculpture, where abstraction was a key factor;

- textile is a materialized process of abstraction;

- the development of abstract art has scientific foundations, and the interaction of textiles and abstraction occurs at the conceptual level<sup>6</sup>.

Let’s look at these concepts in more detail. In favor of the first concept is the fact that the work of some abstract artists – Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Johannes Itten influenced the book “ De la Loi du Contraste Simultané des Couleurs “ (1839) , the author of which was the French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul. The book was a study of the dyeing and weaving processes used in the Tapestry Manufactory in Paris. Itten said that the study of this book inspired him to write abstract paintings based on color contrasts in 1915. Art historian and Director of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (Germany) Markus Brüderlin wrote that the patchwork quilt created by Sonia Delaunay can be considered the first work of abstract art that preceded the “invention” of abstract painting in Paris by one year<sup>7</sup>.

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6. Van Tilburg M. Abstraction. / Mateusz Kapustka, Anika Reineke, Anne Röhl, Tristan Weddigen, dir., Textile Terms: A Glossary (Gebr. Mann Verlag, February 2017) URL: [https://www.academia.edu/29412184/Abstraction\\_entry\\_in\\_Textile\\_Terms\\_A\\_Glossary\\_dir\\_Mateusz\\_Kapustka\\_Anika\\_Reineke\\_Anne\\_Röhl\\_and\\_Tristan\\_Weddigen\\_Gebr.\\_Mann\\_Verlag\\_2017](https://www.academia.edu/29412184/Abstraction_entry_in_Textile_Terms_A_Glossary_dir_Mateusz_Kapustka_Anika_Reineke_Anne_Röhl_and_Tristan_Weddigen_Gebr._Mann_Verlag_2017) (date of consultation in the reference: 07.04.2020).

7. Van Tilburg M. Abstraction. / Mateusz Kapustka, Anika Reineke, Anne Röhl, Tristan

In 2013 – 2014 the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg hosted the exhibition “Art and Textiles”, where about 200 works were presented, including paintings by Gustav Klimt, Vincent van Gogh, Edgar Degas, Henri Matisse, Paul Klee and Jackson Pollock. In addition to paintings, the exhibition included textile objects, such as a fragment of pre-Columbian weaving from the collection of Anni Albers. The purpose of the exhibition was to explore the role of textiles in the history of art from the beginning of XX century to the present. It was noted that the division of applied and fine arts accepted in art criticism led to the exclusion of textiles from the historical and artistic context, while the links between fine and applied art are obvious. An exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg raised the question of the role of textile techniques in the formation of abstract art. The orthogonal structure of the fabric—the intersection of the warp and weft threads found a response in the grid structure of Piet Mondrian’s paintings. In addition the exhibition “Art and Textiles” paid special attention to the exit of textile art from the plane of the picture to the area of space. This idea was illustrated by installations by such authors as Lenore Tawney, Fred Sandback, Peter Kogler, Chiaru Shiota<sup>8</sup>.

The idea of the exhibition “Art and Textiles” echoes the concept of the project “Ornament and Abstraction”, held in 2001 at the Foundation Beyeler (Switzerland). “Ornament and Abstraction” emphasized the role of ornament in the formation of abstract art of the XX century by comparing works of fine art with applied art objects of different cultures<sup>9</sup>. The idea of the exhibition was based on the theory of the Viennese art critic Alois Riegl. In his book “Problems of Style. Foundation

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Weddigen, dir., *Textile Terms: A Glossary* (Gebr. Mann Verlag, February 2017)

URL: [https://www.academia.edu/29412184/Abstraction\\_entry\\_in\\_Textile\\_Terms\\_A\\_Glossary\\_dir\\_Mateusz\\_Kapustka\\_Anika\\_Reineke\\_Anne\\_Röhl\\_and\\_Tristan\\_Weddigen\\_Gebr\\_Mann\\_Verlag\\_2017](https://www.academia.edu/29412184/Abstraction_entry_in_Textile_Terms_A_Glossary_dir_Mateusz_Kapustka_Anika_Reineke_Anne_Röhl_and_Tristan_Weddigen_Gebr_Mann_Verlag_2017) (date of consultation in the reference: 07.04.2020). Citation: Markus Brüderlin, “Zur Ausstellung. Die Geburt der Abstraktion aus dem Geiste des Textilen und die Eroberung des Stoff-Raumes”, in: *Kunst & Textil. Stoff als Material und Idee in der Moderne von Klimt bis heute*, ed. by Markus Brüderlin, Ostfildern 2013, pp. 14–45, exh. cat.: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and Staatsgalerie Stuttgart. - P. 34–41.

8. *Art & Textiles. Fabric as Material and Concept in Modern Art from Klimt to the Present*. 12.10.2013 – 02.03.2014. URL: <https://www.kunstmuseum-wolfsburg.de/exhibitions/art-and-textiles-fabric-as-material-and-concept-in-modern-art-from-klimt-to-the-present/> (date of consultation in the reference: 10.04.2020)

9. *Ornament und Abstraktion*. URL: <https://www.fondationbeyeler.ch/en/ausstellungen/vergangene-ausstellungen/ornament-und-abstraktion> (date of consultation in the reference: 10.04.2020)

[/vergangene-ausstellungen/ornament-und-abstraktion](#) (дата обращения: 10.04.2020)



*Il. 1. Gunta Stölzl "Five Choirs", made in the technique of jacquard weaving.*



of the History of Ornament” Alois Riegl argued with the followers of the concept of Gottfried Semper. According to the theory of G. Semper, the process of creating an object of applied art was determined by the material from which it was made, the technique of execution and the material function that is inherent in it<sup>10</sup>. Followers of G. Semper, so-called “semperians” according to A. Riegl, simplified his theory, making a hasty conclusion, that all art forms were always the direct result of materials and techniques<sup>11</sup>. By the ideas of Alois Riegl, above the practical aspects is the supreme principle of the artist’s creativity – his “will to art” (Kunstwollen), expressed in the art of ornament<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the form of the created object becomes not a consequence of the use of technology and material, but the meaning of creative activity. In his book Alois Riegl revised the traditional hierarchy of arts, in which applied art was given a secondary role.

As for the concept that in the XX century there was a development of textile art as a means of self-expression in the context of modern artistic trends, this is supported by the work of the Bauhaus textile workshop, where flat textile works were created, the style of which corresponded to abstract paintings. We can note, for example, the work of Gunta Stölzl “Five Choirs” (Il. 1), made in the technique of jacquard weaving. The panel is stylistically associated with the painting “Pastoral” (Rhythms) by Paul Klee (Il.2).

Subsequently, there was a change in the concept of textile art. In the second half of the XX century, during the so-called “plastic explosion”, new forms of textiles appeared, they went from the plane to the volume, from the field of painting to the field of sculpture. In an attempt to emphasize their independence from abstract painting, the artists worked with natural, often unpainted or locally colored fibers, shifting their attention from the field of color experiments to the area of three-dimensional.

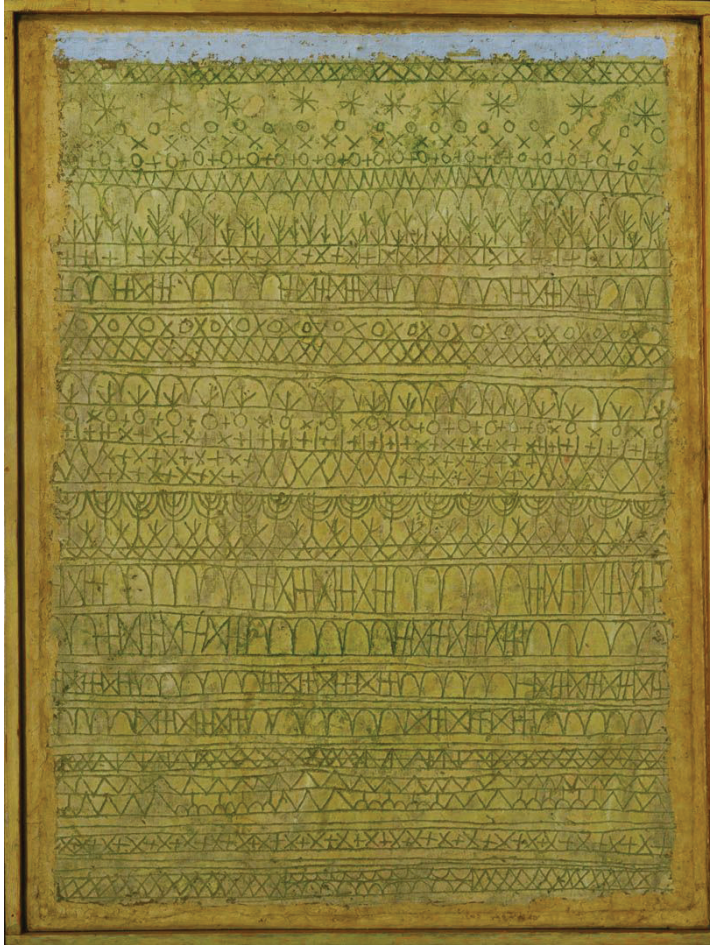
The hypothesis of the universality of abstraction as a human impulse was confirmed in the concept of the exhibition “Abstract Design in American Quilt”, held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1971. Here, traditional patchwork quilts were displayed as works of abstract art. The exhibition demonstrated stylistic parallels in works

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10. Semper G. *Practicheskaya estetika*. Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1970. – P. 224.

11. Riegl A. *Problems of Style*. Foundation of the History of Ornament. Princeton: Princeton University Press Hardcover, 1993 - P. 4

12. Riegl Alois (1858-1905). URL: <http://cult-lib.ru/doc/culture/encyclopedia-xx-vek/435.htm> (date of consultation in the reference: 11.04.2020)



II. 2. "Pastoral" (Rhythms) by Paul Klee, 1927.

of painting and applied art. Quilts were displayed as paintings, and the exhibition demonstrated the possibility of applying the aesthetics of avant-garde painting to the textile tradition<sup>13</sup>.

13. Hirst, Don't It? Revealing the Invisible. Labor of Female Fiber Artists in Twentieth Century Art. A paper and quilt project by Nora Renick Rinehart and Rachel Wallis. For the Craft/Work Collective. Publication by Nora Renick Rinehart, 2016 – P.6-7.



In support of the theory that the interaction of textiles and abstraction occurs on a conceptual level, the American art critic and art critic Joseph Masheck has spoken out. In 1976, in the article "The Carpet Paradigm: Critical Prolegomena to a Theory of Flatness" Joseph Masheck suggested that the main cause of flatness in painting, the early XX century was the theory of the second half of the XIX century, when ornament began to be preferred naturalistic image; flatness and decorativeness in the visual arts developed together<sup>14</sup>.

In 2006 in Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the *Kunstkamera*) (Saint Petersburg, Russia) took place the exhibition "Oriental Dreams. Russian Russian Avant-Guard and Silks of Bukhara", the purpose of which was to identify the influence of Central Asian fabrics ornament on Russian avant-garde painting. In the exhibition catalog E. Akhmedova noted that the connection between fabrics and avant-garde painting should be considered as part of the overall process of development of world culture. Such aesthetic characteristics as flatness, decorativeness, and ornamentation were characteristic of both avant-garde painting and textiles<sup>15</sup>.

Having considered four theories of interaction between textile art and abstract painting, it should be noted that each of them is confirmed in the studies of art historians and art critics of the XX-XXI centuries. The role of textile in the history of art is currently not fully identified and this topic should undoubtedly be explored more deeply in both theoretical works and practical exhibition projects.

In the XX century, the value of applied art increases. An important role in this process was played by the Bauhaus in Germany and VKhUTEMAS in Russia, which formed a new approach to subject creativity.

The Bauhaus teaching system was influenced by the theories of G. Semper and A. Riegl. The Bauhaus Manifesto, written in 1919, called for abandoning the hierarchy of arts. There has been developed the concept of "gesamtkunstwerk" – universal art work. The emergence of the concept of creating a total art work can be considered an attempt to overcome the disunity of the arts.

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14. Van Tilburg M. 'Rethinking the Carpet Paradigm: Critical Footnotes to a Theory of Flatness', in *Meta-textile. Identity and History of a Contemporary Art Medium*, Marco Costantini and Tristan Weddigen, eds.; Emsdetten/Berlin, Edition Imorde, 2011 - P. 129

15. Akhmedova E. *Two Roses Redden on One Stem // Oriental Dreams. Russian Russian Avant-Guard and Silks of Bukhara. Exhibition catalog. Saint Petersburg, 2006 – P. 137.*

The embodiment of the idea of the *gesamkunstwerk* can be considered the House Am Horn designed by Georg Muhe and presented at the exhibition in 1923, which featured furniture, textiles and other items created by Bauhaus students – illustrating the principle of “art and technology – a new unity”<sup>16</sup>. In the Haus Am Horn were presented the textile works which can be attributed to the abstract-constructive style. This is the panel by Margarete Bittkow-Koehler based on the rhythm of dark and light squares and textile by Ilse Mogelin and Gertrud Arndt.

The creative experiments of the Weaving workshop of Bauhaus undoubtedly demonstrate the influence of the creative ideas of abstract painting on textile art, but, at the same time, it is an attempt to find its own plastic language inherent in textiles. Graduates of the Bauhaus Weaving workshop Gunta Stölzl, Anni Albers and Otti Berger had the greatest influence on the development of textile art of the XX century, including three-dimensional fiber art forms.

An interesting example of a universal art work is the Rabe house in Zwenkau, created by the architect Adolf Rading and the artist Oscar Schlemmer.

Working at the Bauhaus, O. Schlemmer created several performances – “Triadic Ballet “and” Dances of the Bauhaus”, where he studied the human body, its proportions and interaction with space. Costumes became an important part of the performances. Researchers of

O. Schlemmer’s work note that he was inspired by the ideas of Soviet constructivism, in particular “prozodezhda”<sup>17</sup>.

Oscar Schlemmer applied his theatre experience in designing the interior of the Rabe house. He created a composition of wire consisting of three figures that, depending on the lighting, created different shadows on the wall, which caused an association with a sundial. The wall composition for staircases was based on sketches of dancing figures. In accordance with the works of O. Schlemmer, the interior color scheme was created: abstract planes of contrasting colors - red, blue, black and white were located on the walls, ceiling and floor of the living room. “It

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16. Bauhaus: A Conceptual Model. / Editor: Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin/Museum für Gestaltung, Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, and Klassik Stiftung Weimar. Ostfildern.: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009 – P. 152.

17. Rhee B. Oskar Schlemmer: Body as Weapon. Department of Dance. Barnard College, Columbia University, 2007 – P. 15

looked as if Schlemmer had rolled parts of an abstract painting inside the room to combine the space... In contrast to the formal stage where “Triadic ballets” were performed, this was an informal setting that encouraged internal drama and turned architecture into a form of performative art»<sup>18</sup>. Abstract art played a leading role in the interior design of the Rabe house.

The construction of space with the help of abstract color planes can be noted in the works of Soviet constructivist artists - projects by A. Rodchenko, A. Vesnin and others. The theatrical experience of Russian artists who managed to bring the trends of avant-garde painting into space in their productions is also interesting. Performances “Famira Kfared”, which was designed by A. Exter, “Phaedra”, by A. Vesnin, realized the ideas of cubism in the theater<sup>19</sup>. It is noted that “formal means



Il. 3. A. Vesnin. The sketch for decoration for theatre performance *Phaedra*, 1921.

18. Epishin A. S. Gesamtkunstwerk Rabe haus. Rabe house in Zwenkau as a universal artwork // Istoricheskie, filosofskie, politicheskie i juridicheskie nauki, kulturologiia i iskusstvovedenie. Voprosy teorii i praktiki. / Tambov: Gramota, 2017 - P. 63-64

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— geometric planes, color spots, dematerialization of the pictorial plane led many artists of the Russian avant-garde to work with textiles”<sup>20</sup>.

Having considered textiles in the context of XX-XXI centuries abstract art we can draw the following conclusions:

- disputes about the place of applied art among other types of art began at the end of the XIX century and continue to this day;
- trends in the pursuit of abstraction in painting and applied art developed in parallel;
- textile have influenced the development of avant-garde movements in art of the first half of the XX century and developed in these directions;
- the mutual influence of artistic textiles and abstract painting is obvious; art historians and art critics of the XXI century are trying to draw attention to this problem.

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Paul Klee “Pastoral” (Rhythms).

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