

The Art and Bohemian Character of Ethel Wallace

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Ethel Wallace was a painter and textile artist who gained great prominence in the early part of the 20th century. Wallace’s work was exhibited in Paris, London, New York, and Philadelphia. Her textiles were featured by Macy’s department store and published in *Vogue*. Ms. Wallace’s social circle included Paul Poiret, Gertrude Whitney and opera singer Eva Gauthier. Yet, by her death, Wallace and her work had fallen from the public eye. Despite her artistic achievements and innovation of technique, her story has been written out of the history books.

The purpose of this study is to document the work of this female textile artist for future generations. Wallace’s creations contribute to our understanding of American craft and its place in the study of art and artistic traditions. This work also contributes to the research of other scholars concerned with the history of women in the arts.

Wallace was born in 1885 in Recklesstown, New Jersey (Alterman, 2005). In the late 19th century, her father opened a gristmill in Lambertville, NJ, which is across the river from New Hope, PA (Alterman, 2005). Her family’s move to Lambertville would facilitate her joining the New Hope arts scene later in life after pursuing an education at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art and a career in New York City.

By 1898 artists had begun to settle in towns along the Delaware River, such as New Hope and Solebury, PA (Folk, 1997). Painter William Lathrop was a founding father of the New Hope Art Colony in Bucks County. Wallace studied with him as early as 1903. The time with Lathrop paid off, as she was able to gain admission to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art and took classes in drawing from 1905 until 1917. In the 1920’s Wallace established a studio at 62 Washington Square in New York, where her work achieved new vision and form.

“Busy with a pot of dye, a piece of wax and a strip of silk, she pioneered batik portraits” (Charles-Fourth, 1958). Wallace quickly became a fixture in the burgeoning modern art scene of New York’s Jazz Age. A friendship with Italian painter Joseph Stella influenced her conceptually. However, it was Eva Gauthier, famed opera singer, who introduced her to the Javanese practice of batik. On canvases of silk and velvet Wallace created modern interpretations of form that rivaled her contemporaries working in traditional mediums. She became particularly known for her modern



Figure 1 *Vogue* 1921, featuring Wallace's batik portraits.

portraits executed on fabric utilizing the batik method as seen in figure 1. Her work was immediately noticed and exhibited extensively both in the United States and abroad. Additionally, as an apparently astute and productive business woman, in two years time at her studio she “produced 2,000 yards of crepe de chine and 500 yards of velvet done in batik for waists, skirts and over-tunics” (Charles-Fourth, 1958). Gertrude Whitney (sculptress, founding benefactor of the Whitney museum, and a Vanderbilt by birth) took notice and hosted an exhibit of the batiks in her own studio, propelling textile craft to a new level of appreciation.



Figure 2 Ethel Wallace c. 1958 wearing a coat of her own design with hand printed stand-up collar. Image retrieved from the Michener Museum, www.michenermuseum.org.

Wallace died in 1968. Today, outside of Bucks County, PA, few know of her pioneering efforts as a crafter, designer, business owner and artist. Not only was she a talent, but her legacy as an irreverent individual in the New Hope community lives on in oral histories. She was known to drive a car without a windshield and to wear a coat lined with nude portraits of old lovers.

Her disappearance from art history accounts may reflect the position of women in the art world during the first half of the 20th century. To be female and to work with textiles, more often relegated to craft rather than art, possibly subdued any recognition that Wallace was a force in the New York art scene (Aktins, 1997). That some of her textiles were marketable commodities may have also reduced her standing as an artist among later art critics and historians who might dismiss her as a home decorator or fashion designer. This research will introduce the work of this very unique and talented woman who made early 20th century contributions to painting and textile arts.

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