

The Natural History of American Design

DESIGN

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*Julius Kirschner/American Museum of Natural History Library*Clark Wissler in the Plains Indians storage room, American Museum of Natural History, circa 1914.

The trove of rare photographs, textiles, design manuals and garments on display in “An American Style: Global Sources for New York Textile and Fashion Design, 1915-1928,” which opens today in the Focus Gallery at [the Bard Graduate Center](#), calls attention to a relatively unknown effort after World War I by the [American Museum of Natural History](#) to

inspire and energize New York fashion designers. The initiative granted the designers unfettered access to the museum's ethnographic collections of Native American, Mesoamerican, Andean and South American relics. Curators opened up the museum's specimen storage rooms and lent artifacts, like beaded Native American dresses from the Blackfoot tribe, to design firms and department stores for inspiration. The goal was to develop a distinctly American (as opposed to European) design language, but the museum ultimately abandoned the project and its fleeting dream of building a separate museum devoted to non-Western textile arts and industrial design, modeled after London's Victoria & Albert Museum.

Now, the original artifacts are on view in the exhibition curated by Ann Marguerite Tartsinis, who thinks the initiative was embedded in the spirit of its time. A hand-batiked caftan from 1920, in particular, represents the convergence of the era's artistic modernism and wartime nationalism. "The garment represents the bohemian style cultivated by the artistic and cultural avant-garde in New York in the 1920s, while displaying the confluence of global sources championed by the so-called 'fashion staff' at the museum," she said. With fringe trending on the runways right now, it seems that legacy of the project is alive and well in the imaginations of designers today.

"An American Style: Global Sources for New York Textile and Fashion Design, 1915-1928" is on view at Bard Graduate Center from Sept. 27 through Feb. 2.; 18 West 86th Street, New York; bgc.bard.edu.

Correction: September 30, 2013

An earlier version of this post misstated the middle name of the exhibition's curator. She is Ann Marguerite Tartsinis, not Ann Marie Tartsinis.