

18



THE WOMEN'S MAKING



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**PAD #18 | THE WOMEN'S MAKING****O. EDITORIAL #18****The Women's Making**

by Shujun Ban &amp; Marinella Ferrara

**006****I. A BIG PICTURE OF WOMEN'S MAKING****The Women's Making: a Historical Review**

by Shujun Ban &amp; Marinella Ferrara

**015****"What Women Designer Want".****The Female Point of View in the Fashion Creative Process**

by Vittorio Linfante

**041****Women Crafting Today: a Literature Review**

by Shujun Ban &amp; Marinella Ferrara

**065****II. FORERUNNERS****Women's Entrepreneurship in Fashion Design During the 20th Century.****The Case Study of Teresina Negri and GRISINA**

by Roberto de Paolis &amp; Umberto de Paolis

**085****Rosa Menni Giolli and the Passion for Batik.****Middle and Far Eastern Influences Between the Two Wars**

by Anna Mazzanti

**110****Design and Science, From the Bauhaus to Neotropical Research at USP:  
the Trajectory of Marta Erps-Breuer**

by Ana Julia Melo Almeida &amp; Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos

**146****Gertrud Goldschmidt and Ruth Vollmer.****Mathematical Experimentations and the Legacy of Bauhaus Trained Women**

by Virginia Marano

**173****The Art of Daily Life Objects. Charlotte Perriand and Clara Porset Dialogue with Tradition**

by Antonio Stefanelli

**196****Clara Garesio, Ceramic Art and Design in the Neapolitan Context**

by Alfonso Morone &amp; Susanna Parlato

**215**

### III. ABOUT CURRENT PRACTICES

- Designing Contemporary Living Spaces:  
a Feminist Perspective in Urbanism Coming from Col·lectiu Punt 6 in Barcelona** **241**  
by Vera Renau
- Identity and Care in the Daily Life Project of in Changing Women** **259**  
by Debora Giorgi & Tiziana Menegazzo
- How do Women Industrial Designers Succeed in the Workplace?  
Getting In and Getting On** **283**  
by Cathy Lockhart
- Crafting Futures: Inspiring Interdisciplinary Innovation  
with Young Craft Artisans in Malaysia** **306**  
by Marianne McAra & Lynn-Sayers McHattie
- “It Tells You What it Wants to Be”  
How Women Make, with Immanence, Love, Decay and other Transgressions** **329**  
by Melanie Levick-Parkin

### IV. INTERVIEWS

- Textile Design between Tradition & Innovation.  
Interview to Brigitte Perkins** **354**  
by Debora De Giorgi
- Women Sensibility Applied to New Materials and Technologies Processes / 1  
Interview to Ross Steven** **367**  
by Marinella Ferrara & Shujun Ban
- Women Sensibility Applied to New Materials and Technologies Processes / 2  
Interview to Nicole Horn** **377**  
by Shujun Ban & Marinella Ferrara

### V. BIOGRAPHIES

- About the Authors** **391**

0

**EDITORIAL**  
**#18**

# Rosa Menni Giolli and the Passion for Batik

## Middle and Far Eastern Influences between the Two Wars

**Anna Mazzanti**

Politecnico di Milano

### **Keywords**

Textile Design, Silk, Batik, Deco, Milano, Middle and Far East Influences.

### **Abstract**

This paper aims at focusing on the protodesigner Rosa Menni Giolli and her passion for batik. She is chosen as an example of emancipation and female vitality among several Italian “thread designers” (Papini, 1923) during the third and fourth decade of the twentieth century. She also exemplifies the effects of fascination for Middle and Far East in Italy during the time among the two world wars (’20 and ’30). On the trade, exhibitions and Mediterranean exchanges were easy to find stimuli for Italian textiles in renewing decorative forms, patterns, and special makings influenced by distant cultures. Often these external inspirations depend from national political cultures and colonial exchanges as well from the need of defense artisanal processes against the increasing predominance of industrial ones. In the batik method Rosa Menni found an old Oriental technique that gave her the opportunity to renew her repertoire by combining her artistic inclination with craft, her love for woodcut and precious material such as silk, the experimentation with patterns such as colors. She had a large artistic background that gave her strong stimuli: the oriental ones in a different way than they did for artists and designers during Art Nouveau period, for her they became a grammatical repertory for a new process of “stylization by synthesis” (Papini, 1923) that characterized 20s Italian style from art to design. The case of Rosa Menni is also an example for mixing artistic and crafts technicians and a woman of early emancipation. She successfully opened in 1921 her enterprise named Le Stoffe della Rosa and was the head of her-made laboratory which employed several workers.

## 1. Foreword

While the first decade of the twentieth century was characterized by the enchantment of Art Nouveau with exotic worlds as an escape, in the 1920s Italian textile production looked to the Orient in a new way, as a search for cultural identity and stimulus for new, autonomous processes. The fascination with the Middle and Far East was due to the awareness of the connection between artistic and artisanal processes that remained integral in those cultures and defense of the relationship between “art and craft” against the gradual predominance of industrial processes – something that linked all the Italian protodesigners “artists of thread” (Papini, 1923).

Towards the industrialization of textiles, as serial production, there are many hesitations and concerns about the loss of traditional craftsmanship skills in which the Italian female entrepreneurial peculiarities identified themselves. Although the Monza exhibitions in the early 1920s attempted to safeguard alongside women’s industries under the common hat of Italianness that the director Guido Marangoni preferred in an open confrontation with the international trends hosted in Monza, even self-defensive positions by women arose, for example in articles around embroidery by Elisa Ricci (Ricci, 1925) or by the artist Rosa Menni (Menni Giolli, 1924).

In addition to exhibitions and women’s criticism, the urgency of a national fashion identity was manifested in 1919 in Italy through the first National Congress for the Clothing Industries, a sign of a movement of autonomy from French dominance and also of the climate of support and trust towards cloths and textiles businesses including women’s ones. This is confirmed by the birth of the national magazine *Lidel*,

founded in the same 1919 by Lydia De Liguoro, an influential woman in the Milanese and Italian fashion culture and arbiter of taste. She was moved by “the will of a steadfast woman’s heart, which intended to address to the flower of the women of Italy” (De Liguoro, 1934) dedicated both to modern women-readers and to feminine genius documented inside the pages. As example of that Italian identity that she had pushed to enroll in the *Fascio* women’s union in Milan headquarters of the Humanitarian Society, professional school whose Fashion section had been run since the first decade of the twentieth century by Rosa Genoni, supporter of Italian originality (Grandi & Vaccari, 2004, pp. 21-29, 103-106; Gnoli, 2017). This both protective and control Italian climate encouraged female entrepreneurial in the wake of the pioneers Maria Monaci Gallenga e Rosa Genoni, tailoring challenges of an artistic nature capable of incorporating avant-garde vitalism.

This essay focuses on the case of Rosa Menni Giolli (Milano 1889 - Melzo 1975) and her artistic/artisan production grafted into this humus with the use of the piece dyeing technique called *batik*, imported from Southeast Asia. Her artistic vocation represented the inspiring soul of practical research in a unique mix (Orsi Landini, 1991; Grandi & Vaccari, 2004). Materials, processes and colors, as well as the organization of the work in the laboratory, and then the promotion strategies, were stages and integral parts of her company *Le stoffe della Rosa*, exemplary female, artistic and entrepreneurial emancipation, during the 1920s in Italy (Ricci, 1991; Gnoli, 2017) starting from the tone of the chosen title. It seems to intercept the exhortations of the campaign by the *Fascio* women’s union in Milan, which asked to call for Italian names of clothing



and firms (De Liguoro, 1920). *Le stoffe della Rosa* plays with the definite article a very domestic effect to the floral proper name. As has been repeatedly stated this was in fact the time of “fashion designed by artists and artist-craftsmen – among them many women – who, although limited in their commercial impact, proved to be careful to incorporate the coeval artistic experimentation and the instances connected to the debate between artisanal product and artistic product, to arrive, also in the field of clothing, to the formulation of an autonomous Italian style”(Grandi & Vaccari 2004, pp. 21-29, 103-106), which will represent the foundation for the birth of Italian *Alta Moda* in the post-war period.

Rosa Menni summarizes the concept of emancipated female entrepreneurship with artistic attitude in her own preface in the catalog of her solo exhibition at the Galleria Pesaro in Milan in 1923: “going from the design to the realized form...I do not at all believe that a so-called decorative art studio could be considered vital if it merely stops at the design, if it limits itself to the idea part of the project” (Menni Giolli in A.B., 1920). Still in this transitional period vitalist and profoundly artistic tendencies prevailed in processes in harmony with a theoretical approach and the ideal of the total work of art. Again Menni Giolli exhorts “one needs to become one with the material for which he creates, to know it, to shape it...until one knows all its secrets in depth and art and craft make a whole that lives in life, that participates entirely in one’s own destiny” (Menni Giolli, n.d.).

Wife of the art critic Raffaele Giolli, she had a large wide knowledge of the styles and tastes of the time in Europe and Italy, a strong historical background and in particular she was

fascinated from those “beautiful Oriental silks” (Menni Giolli, n.d.) that she could profusely find in Italian shops before the First World War.

The trade of objects and imported textiles from China and Japan had never diminished and rather increased with the crisis of the Chinese feudal lords between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the constant good diplomatic relations between Italy and Japan; meanwhile starting in 1902 the Italian protectorate presided over the region of Peking (Montedo Mapelli, 2006). After the war arrest, the visit of the future emperor Hirohito to Italy and the first flight between Rome and Tokyo in 1920 were signs of renewed consolidation of ties from before the war between the world’s two major producers of silk (Brenni, 1926). During this period silk could still be the material of choice for Italian designers as testifies *Lidel*. Meanwhile in the increasingly practical, rationalist and spare apartments of the Milanese and Italian bourgeoisie, collecting Oriental objects survived as can be perceived in the interiors, for example by architects Rava, Albin, Buzzi, (Fig. 1) photographed for *Domus* and *Casabella*. There, geometric and essential modern furnishings were perfectly integrated with pieces from exotic collections but also with modern Italian objects and fabrics in agreement with the original interpretation of oriental styles.

While Parisian fashion remained as the driving fulcrum in Europe of the Orientalizing trend with its “arabesque sensuality drunk with color” kept alive by the *mise en scène* of the Ballets Russes and their imaginative visitation from the Orient concocted by the stylist Paul Poiret (Messina, 2013), the Italian trend reached a proper directness as the decorative arts show.

According to the critic Roberto Papini, their “originality is not in its bizarreness or trying to astonish but on a rigorous line of logical adherence to the needs of the material used, of the return to simplified forms, trimmed, purified in obedience to the healthiest ideas of the guiding architecture and master of any artistic rebirth”(Papini, 1923): a process of “stylization by synthesis” through which “are reborn the pure values – plastic, design, chromatic of mass, line and tone” rediscovering the old tradition (Papini, 1930). Thus, the traditions coexisted with the renewed interest for forms, materials and processes which derived from distant cultures and with which they dialogued for certain “primitive” affinities of style and adherence to manual, antique or rudimentary traditions. Within this climate women entrepreneurs, designers and inventors of textiles, processes and patterns easily moved between traditions and innovations never denying their underlying artistic (Papini, 1923).



**Figure 1.** Carlo Emilio Rava, Furniture (with African weapons) in Lunchroom, Milan, 1933. Photo from Mollino, 1947.



**Figure 2.** Rosa Menni Giolli photo portrait, 1923ca. From Menni Giolli, n.d.

## 2. “Art of the East and Fashion of the West. The Decoration in Style is Batik”<sup>1</sup>

Rosa Menni (Fig. 2), graduate of the Accademia di Brera, convinced of the quality of textiles “dyed in pieces” (“*tinti in pezze*”) (Menni Giolli, s.d.) compared to yarns, made the batik as her primary expressive tool even if she didn’t disdain to paint and print the most varied fabrics from cottons to velvets, from silks to linen. While, for example, other thread designers as Carla Visconti di Modrone<sup>2</sup> adopted batik in combination with her refined embroidery for goods of Oriental origin like kimonos and dressing gowns (Giuggiari, 2018 (Fig. 3), Menni customizes the Javanese batik which she develops through printing benches with which she creates artistic decorative systems for furnishing fabrics as well as for clothes. As in a painting the synthetic patterns take shape in Rosa Menni’s fabric and maintain in the tightness of the simplified dress, tunics, jackets and *pijami* (Fig. 4) as well in Fauve, Bauhaus and more innovative Deco that are suitable for the synthesis and stylization of the decorations.

Distant lands continue to procure “unusual and pleasing sparks of inspiration” we read in an article of *Lidel* from 1920 dedicated to the technique of batik (M.C., 1920).

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1. Arte d’oriente e moda d’occidente (il Batik). *Lidel*, a.II, January 1, 1920.

2. The activity of Carla Erba, wife of Count Visconti di Modrone, is little known but worthy of attention. Luchino Visconti’s mother had not only interested in being the only woman welcomed by the Lancia and Ponti Labyrinth but for a refined philanthropic activity of protodesign of embroidered fabric and also printed textile. This essay’s author is doing research about her activity.





Pijama.

**Figure 4.** Rosa Menni Giolli, Pijam of swallows. From Menni Giolli, n.d.

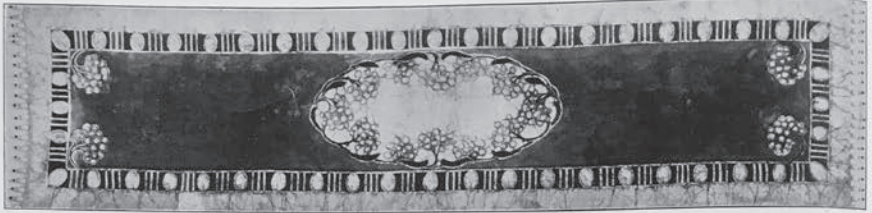
The first fabrics painted with this technique, which originated from the Malaysian archipelago<sup>3</sup>, exposed to a vast Western audience were the costumes worn by the Java dancers at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900. Therefore, even though there was already a school in Holland for the dying of fabrics according to this method, they were the light dresses of the priestly dancers to spread from Paris into Europe the fashion for batik which enjoyed a wide following in Italy (Fig. 5a, 5b) in the years between the wars which was hardly a coincidence. It was the period that witnessed a dynamic artisanal industriousness by women in the textile sector which several people like Vittorio Ferrari supposed formed the basis for the quality of the Italian handmade tradition. From Milan to Rome, the school of batik spread<sup>4</sup>, to teach in rapid apprenticeships the *Kitab* method of dyeing by immersion light silks that were “washable” and could be done by any woman in her own house as claimed by the advertisements widespread in every magazine “very easy to do, not requiring any special skills in painting or drawing to do it yourself” (*Scuola del Batik*, 1925) (Fig. 6).

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3. The word batik derives from *tik*, which means drop in Malay. The origins of this technique are of controversial provenance – from either China or India – but it surely developed in the Java Island in Indonesia where for centuries very refined examples have been produced, all of them worked exclusively by hand. These goods express through their designs and colors the founding elements of the culture and social life of the Indonesian people and fuse together in their essence the design capacity, artistic expression and the technical-manual skills of those who create them. The MUDEC Museum of Milan has hosted an exhibition (without a catalogue) *From Batik to Art Nouveau: The thread that links East and West* (June 8 – August, 26 2018) dedicated to Oriental batiks as stimuli for European Art Nouveau batiks, therefore the period immediately preceding the one discussed in this text. See also Hitchcock, Nuryanti, 2000.

4. Milanese schools of printed fabrics were increasing, such as that of the Kitab Method by Maddalena Dalla Riva with stands at the Milan Trade Fair in 1925, advertised on *Lidel* (De Liguoro, 1926).





## ARTE D'ORIENTE E MODA D'OCCIDENTE

*La decorazione di moda è il "Batik" che ritroviamo ovunque, perchè ovunque può essere applicato, nella casa e nelle vesti, sulla tela o sul velluto.*

Nella ricerca affannosa della novità la Moda chiede non di rado l'ispirazione al passato o alle più lontane regioni esotiche. Sempre e ovunque, perfino presso i popoli più semplici e primitivi, ha esistito un'arte per dar risalto alla bellezza muliebre o per adornare il nido: è naturale

che si spigoli tra gli innumerevoli modelli offerti dai secoli scorsi o dai paesi remoti per scegliere qualche punto gradevole poco comune. La scelta è suggerita talvolta dal più fortunato dei casi, e vi è poi chi si meraviglia che si sia tanto tardato a sfruttare una buona idea; ma bisogna che l'idea colpisca la fantasia di uno dei despoti della Moda,

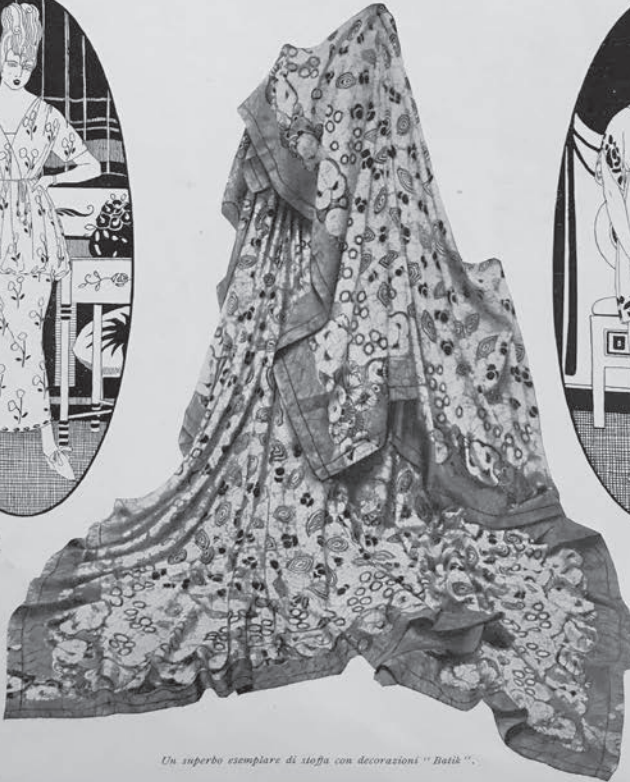
che non hanno l'abitudine di frequentare gli archivi e le pinacoteche o di viaggiare agli antipodi, a scopo professionale.

Una graziosa idea di decorazione delle stoffe è stata suggerita, durante l'esposizione universale di Parigi nel 1900, da un gruppo di fanciulle giava-

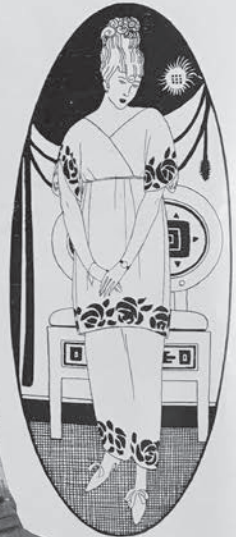


*Abito in voile con applicazioni batik*

*A Giava certi disegni a tre colori non potevano servire che al capo supremo.*



*Un superbo esemplare di stoffa con decorazioni "Batik".*



*Abito in tela con applicazioni batik*

*Così la nostra elegantissima vuole un modello disegnato per lei sola.*



*L'utilizzazione del Batik può avere la sua applicazione massima in tutto ciò che rende bella la nostra casa - portiere, cuscini, abatjour, brise-bise, tappeti, federe per libri, scatole - e la fantasia si può lanciare nelle creazioni più libere di luce e di colori.*

nesi che, per conto di un impresario, ballavano, innanzi alla folla cosmopolita, le danze native. Si ammiravano le loro pose quasi jeratiche, i loro gesti delicati, gli ondeggiamenti da cigno del loro collo sottile, ma gli occhi erano attratti anche dal loro caratteristico costume. Il corpo esile era avvolto in due rettangolari di stoffa, di cui uno modellava i seni e l'altro si arrotolava dalla cintola alle caviglie: unico ornamento una sciarpa stretta alla cintura, con le estremità a frange svolazzanti, che, danzando, le fanciulle agitavano con gesto quasi d'automata. La leggera stoffa dell'abito sommario offriva allo sguardo una varietà singolare di disegni dai colori vivaci in cui si sbizzarriva la fantasia orientale. Non era evidentemente una stoffa trapunta né colorata coi metodi consueti, e i disegni apparivano originali non tanto per l'invenzione quanto per il modo con cui erano resi. Alcuni artisti curiosi vollero guardarli da vicino e chiesero spiegazioni all'impresario olandese: fu così che vennero a scoprire il \*batik\*. Seppero anche che in Olanda esisteva già una scuola per la lavorazione della stoffa secondo il metodo giavaneese. L'idea piacque, ma non attecchì subito: soltanto da alcuni anni si è pensato ad aprire a Parigi un laboratorio analogo i cui prodotti vanno ora incontrando il più largo favore, non solo negli ambienti d'eccezione, ma anche nel mondo più elegante.

Il \*batik\* è, in poche parole, il principio dell'acqua forte applicato alle stoffe. Si comincia col dare alla seta o al cotone la consistenza necessaria per mezzo d'un bagno nell'olio di ricino. La stoffa, asciugata, viene quindi distesa sopra un telaio di bambù e la Giavane, tenendo vicino un vaso pieno di cera vergine che una fiammella conserva liquida senza farla bollire, vi immerge un piccolo strumento, una specie di mira di rame con un manico di bambù e un cancellino più o meno sottile che permette di ottenere effetti più o meno tenui: attraverso il piccolo tubo la donna versa la cera sul disegno accennato grossolanamente col carbone. È un disegno tradizionale, secolare, in cui si vedono sbocciare fiori, insetti e uccelli meravigliosi. Riscaldato il disegno con la cera, la donna immerge la stoffa in un bagno di color giallo, e di giallo si colorano tutte le parti che la cera non ricopre: si lascia quindi asciugare la stoffa che in una nuova bollitura perde la cera lasciando vedere un disegno bianco su sfondo giallo. Con un procedimento analogo vengono quindi spalmate di cera le parti gialle: per poter immergere la stoffa in un bagno azzurro e dare al disegno un rilievo color indaco. Sovrapponendo i due colori complementari, la donna giavaneese ottiene anche una magnifica tinta verde.

È questo il sistema adottato nell'isola dell'Oceano Indiano, ma i mezzi di cui si dispone in Europa hanno permesso di renderlo ancora più accurato. Vi è una maggiore varietà di colori; i chimici hanno tratto da piante esotiche nuove e più delicate tinte. La fantasia orientale rimane fedele ai disegni ispirati dalla flora: gli artisti occidentali cercano, senza allontanarsi soverchiamente dall'idea tipica, nuove combinazioni di ritmi e di colori. L'arte moderna trova un nuovo campo fertile da coltivare. Le stoffe lavorate col \*batik\* non si prestano soltanto all'ammirazione degli spettatori ai lumi della ribalta: vanno conquistando anche l'intimità dei salotti, e l'intimità ancor più gelosa e discreta della grazia femminile. Già parecchie dame dell'aristocrazia italiana si sono invaghiate delle stoffe così lavorate, seguendo l'esempio della regina di Romania che ne ha fatto un mantello. Esse hanno potuto invaghiarsene vedendole esposte nelle mostre e nelle sartorie parigine. Non v'è alcuna ragione perché in Italia, nella patria della luce e dei colori, non abbia a trionfare un'arte che trae dalla gamma dei colori il suo fascino.

me.



*Esposizione di lavori eseguiti da Madame Pangon (61, rue Le Boétie, Parigi).*

**Figure 5b.** Arte d'oriente e moda d'occidente (il Batik). From *Lidel*, a.II, January 1, 1920.

## SCUOLA DEL BATIK METODO KITAB



Scialle decorato a fiorami multicolori col Batik "Metodo KITAB"

*Le Signore e Signorine che vogliono dare al loro abbigliamento e alla loro casa una particolare impronta d'arte e di buon gusto, troveranno alla scuola del Batik Metodo KITAB (corso V. Emanuele 22, Milano) il più valido aiuto, poichè il Metodo KITAB facilmente adattabile a tutti gli stili, dispone di una gamma ricchissima di bei colori creati in due tipi, per la pittura su seta e quella su cotone.*

*La "Scuola del Batik" per venire incontro al desiderio delle sue numerose allieve e clienti pubblica una piccola e artistica rivista ricca di disegni in nero e a colori specialmente studiati per la decorazione Metodo KITAB e con un disegno in grandezza naturale di esecuzione.*

*Il numero di saggio viene inviato contro vaglia di L. 3,20 diretto alla signora Maddalena Da-Riva, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, 22, pagabile presso la succursale postale n. 25, Milano.*

*La "Scuola del Batik" espone alla Fiera Campionaria di Milano, negli Standa N. 2730 - 2732 Gruppo V a destra dell'ingresso del Padiglione delle Arti Decorative, una bella raccolta di lavori eseguiti coi colori e col Metodo "KITAB".*

Batik involved a simple process of distributing wax through a sort of metallic pipe with a small tube on marks transmitted with a small instrument (*tjanting*) from decorative graphic repertoires that the schools made available to the students along with a rich range of colors for silk or cotton (M.C., 1920). The ease accounted for the growing popularity of the technique in this environment of a return to a national manual tradition and the blossoming of artisanal “small industries” in which women played a strong role. It was also up to women to take the leading roles in artistic batik.

An enthusiast of silk-screen printing since as early as her schooling, Rosa Menni developed a personal process of *mor-sure* (biting) with the incision of woodblocks, far from kitab and domestic production. She was fascinated by the original Indian procedures with their effects of very thin branches, “those veins that radiate from the colored areas above the other colored ones” (Buffoni, 1923), and she was able to use the veins of wood to create on silk as an expert woodcutter similar effects, but more expressive and dependent on the irregularities of the matrices with some vague reference to primitive cultures and suggestions derived from their rudimentary drawing essentiality. Anyway, as she remembers, woods appeared so strange to the habits of the printing works and above all to print on fabric where no one in Italy had ever seen such. Otherwise Mariano Fortuny as well as Maria Gallenga molded patterns but inspired by the old tradition or refined oriental decorations more in line with the eclecticism of the time and with decorative serial use of the matrices. Instead Menni loved that sturdy imprint of engraved wood that usually disappears in the mechanical workmanship of

the engravers who reduce the wood to the coldness of marble and metal. Moreover, she introduced on this method a “messy joy” of colors (Fig. 7), dipping the fabric in dyes for the batik coloration and personalizing the decorations, many of which were based on exotic models as she writes in her unpublished autobiography, a tableau of Italian intellectual society of that time which deserves to be printed (Menni Giolli, *Una donna fra due secoli*).

Therefore, the case of Rosa Menni was not part of the heedless appropriation of the “do-it-yourself” batik in the nationalist and colonial climate, but her evident high artistic inclination could find general acclaim for the spread of the medium.



**Figure 7.** Rosa Menni Giolli, model of colors and forms for batik. Milano, E. Badaracco Foundation, Menni Giolli Archive.

The success achieved both in Monza and in Paris in 1925 declares the positive reception of her production considered on the border of both art and design. Through her study of geometry, her experimentation with processes, Rosa Menni developed her personal revolution compared to the “prudent old silks and perfect balances of the things from beyond the Alps” (Menni Giolli, n.d.).

As it is quoted on the magazines, she updated the slow process of the true batik “to several layers of wax and subsequent color baths” on the cottons, as well as the “pinched” techniques of the *chibori* and the *placa* prints on canvas, velvet or silk (Buffoni, 1923) according to her own artistic experiments by creating unique pieces making use of a printing laboratory from the beginning.

Her interpretation – she was aware – produced results that are “undisciplined and powerful; the colors too showy, the designs agitate shapes that are somewhat incomplete” (Pansera, 2006). As she describes on the Galleria Pesaro Exhibition catalog: it may happen that “a carefully researched color tone is frayed in cooking, another salt of two tone”. The effects of colors even depend on the different supports: wool, silk, linen, velvet, jute or paper. “Each material has its mystery. Today – she added – we have to engrave wood and linoleum, tomorrow to cut zinc and cardboard. The work is varied and restless”. Rosa advocated the use of synthetic colors, aniline, capable of effects no less unusual and new compared to vegetable and animal colors of the traditional oriental batik, and as well they “do not alter even to hot soaps, or to long exposure to light”.



**Figure 8.** Rosa Menni Giolli, Eastern landscape. Milano, E. Badaracco Foundation, Menni Giolli Archive.

She could conclude “this personal experiences bring combinations and secret additions that in the years will multiply indefinitely” (Menni Giolli, n.d.).

The sensitivity towards a spiritual universe which is manifest in her writings has connections both with Oriental culture and avant-garde that flutter in her patterns for fabrics, in designs and textiles conserved in her archive preserved at the Fondazione Badaracco of Milan<sup>5</sup> (Menni Giolli, n.d.; Menni Giolli, n.d.).

5. The Rosa Giolli Menni Archives are loaned by her heirs to the Elvira Badaracco Foundation in Milan.



**Figure 9.** Geometric shapes. Watercolor. Milano, E. Badaracco Foundation, Menni Giolli Archive.

Therefore, among her designs we find clear inspiration from Javese batik, from Chinese chibori and bandanas from India, that she herself recounts having studied since 1918.

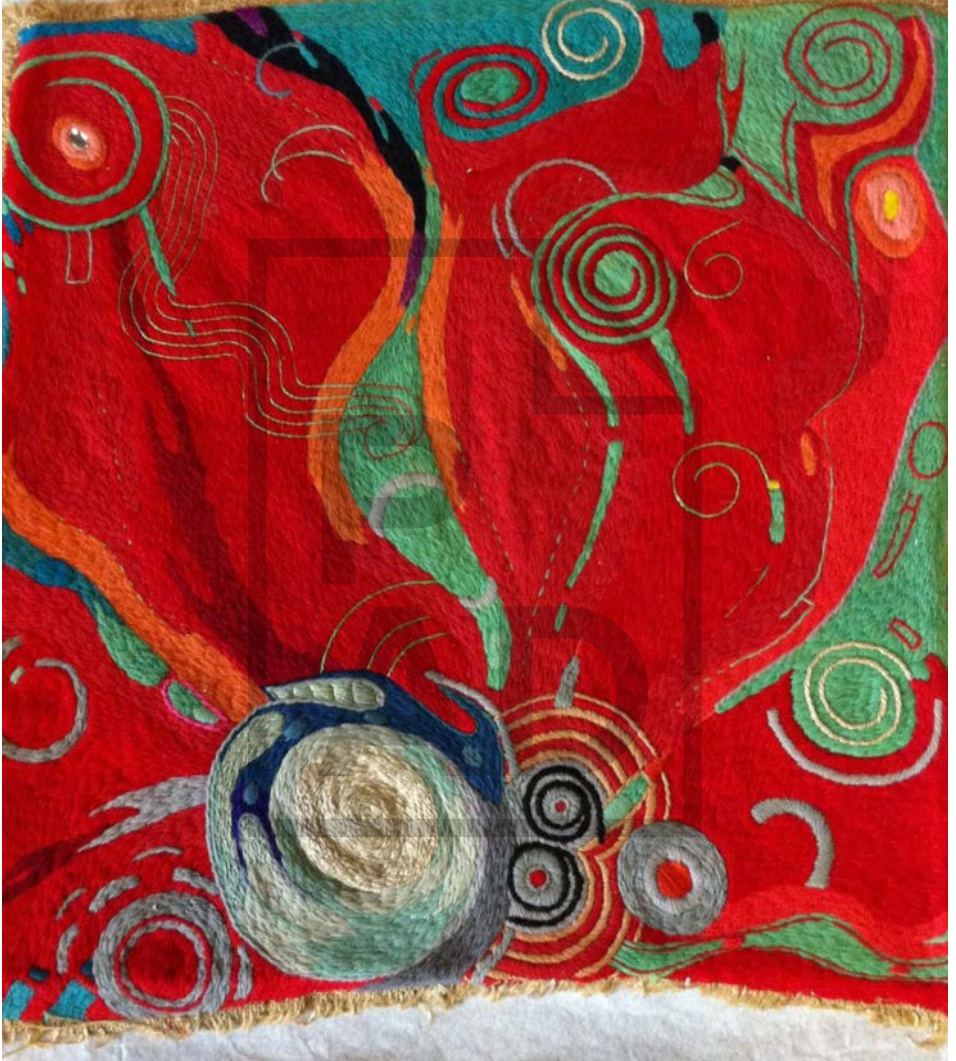
Anyway her exotic landscapes (Fig. 8), cashmere decorations and synthetic floral motifs straddle Fauvist tones and Futurist geometries (Fig. 9) when circles and curved lines with an Orphic flair (between artists Kupka and Delaunay and his wife<sup>6</sup>) do not predominate, the fruit of a visual and cultural knowledge of an Italian updated “upper-class dilettante” (Bossaglia, 1979).

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6. If the asymmetrical profiles of the dynamic dress cuts by the avant-garde, from the Futurists to Sonia Delauney, reinvented a new set-up of the dress in synesthesia with the geometric and chromatic patterns, although in a similar sense on the Deco context impoverished of preciousness, even Rosa Menni gave movement and depth with color and subjects (Orsi Landini, 1991).



Likewise, the sister embroiderers of young Marcello Nizzoli must have experienced wefts of threads for similar layouts full of color (Fig. 10).



**Figure 10.** Marcello Nizzoli, Notes of colour, 1914 (perhaps later). Jute embroidery in wool and silk with a thrown stitch. Probable execution of his sisters. Florence, Uffizi, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe Collection.

Nizzoli was also a distinguished Futurist in the early 1920s and good friend of the couple Giolli Menni. (Menni Giolli, n.d.). He designed patterns with geometric forms for cushions allusive of a Japanese synthesis but uprooted, dreamy, oriental arabesques in “undisciplined and powerful” geometric swirls like the patterns of Rosa Menni Giolli (Fig. 11), also charmed by the Orient but full of jumbles of crazy colors and agitated, disorderly designs (Menni Giolli, n.d.), that in fact looked to the Italian and French avant-garde scene (Bossaglia, 1979).

For Rosa the suggestions from exotic cultures were absorbed within a search for identity, one’s own style in a period of growing nationalism, in the tireless tenacity to guide her products with personal style and expertise.



**Figure 11.** Rosa Menni Giolli, patten for batik, watercolor. Milano, E. Badaracco Foundation, Menni Giolli Archive.

Quote: “I feel the need to be entirely of my time and to express myself with a current word without taking up the ancients, but only by spontaneously descending from them as traditions allow” (Menni Giolli, n.d.).

While she was still a student she was reading Hölderling, and the motto below her woodcut logo that she used for her laboratory *Le stoffe della Rosa* (Rosa’s fabrics) (Fig. 12), adopted a verse from a laud of Jacopone da Todi: “*Dal folle sapienza, E dalla spina rosa*” (“From folly wisdom, and from the thorn the rose”) which in reminding us of her name, summarizes well the startling vigor against any medieval intellectualism of a master of Vulgate poetry of a spiritual and Franciscan inclination (from Francesco d’Assisi), perhaps a self-identifying metaphor for batik, a modern “pauperess” of the traditional practices of Italian textiles.



Figure 12. Rosa Menni Giolli, *Le stoffe della Rosa*, Giolli Menni’s trademark textile, 1920. Woodcut.

Her Orphist explosions of rhythmic lines and concentric colors, the dynamic distortions of Oriental patterns or colonial between Africa and the Middle East, presume therefore on one hand the mediation of Klimt and the Secessionists more so than of Orphism and the Parisian deco geometries as well as the colors of Matisse understandably loved (Menni Giolli, n.d., B.6.F.3, p.25). On the other hand, they reveal a direct knowledge of precedents, a passion for the Orient that she shared with her writer and art historian husband Raffaello. For example, he dedicated an article to the new *Museo milanese di arte orientale*, opened at the Castello Sforzesco, in his magazine *Poligono* (April 1930, pp. 359-366) stating how much Milan was “so rich in Chinese and Japanese art”. At the same time Giolli couple’s interest in Oriental philosophy and occultism could have certainly contributed to Rosa’s revisitation of exotic patterns conditioned by a fluid and “non-static” perception of eternity and space as a world view.

### 3. Le Stoffe della Rosa

Financially supported by her parents in entrepreneurship, she opened a laboratory in the same year she married Raffaello Giolli (February 27, 1920). For a decade the laboratory of strongly artistic characteristics concentrated all her entrepreneurial energies without ever ceding to her domestic duties – meanwhile three children were born – or to the pressures of high costs (machines, fabrics, colors, labor). She kept the atelier active until the end of the decade when the death of her father in 1929, her main financial supporter, the growing costs and the great depression (Mingardo, Caccia) put into crisis the complex system of international sales relations that she had

set up, unsustainable for a direct-run art workshop; then the editorial work of her husband redirected her interests. During the decade, in the various locations (from Via dell'Unione to Via Petrella even to the basement rooms, filled with worktables and machines, of the villetta named *Honolulu* in via Compagnone close to the Samples Fair where the Giollis went to live in 1923 and later in Via Filippo Carcano 19 (Menni Giolli, n.d.), Rosa firsthand designed fabrics and prepared them “almost until the printing”. She had learned “fixing, washing, and pressing” (Menni Giolli, n.d.), from silk bleaching to ironing, at the printing house of Edoardo Mattoi. His premature death led Rosa to “emancipation”, to open her own laboratory in 1923 under the name and brand *Le stoffe della Rosa*. It was a true artistic laboratory with designers, dyers and printers, considered not as workers but collaborators, against the current in the era of industrialization when the number of female workers increased as well as home-based crafts according to the main domestic role for women (Calanca, 2002; Gnoli, 2017). This grit of an emancipated woman ready to face social competition like man transpires from the biographical chronicles as she appears photographed for the 1923 catalog in a straight *robe-chemise* that leaves her arms bare as we can probably imagine the legs at the knee (Fig. 2). One of those clothes that “accept” the body, it was said then, in the name of the practicality and simplicity of the cuts, but not of the fabrics, a sign of an all-Italian tradition, as one of the Milanese pioneer seamstresses of independent fashion wrote, Marta Palmer, one of the clients of the same Giolli Menni. In favor of the independence of Italian fashion, Palmer exclaimed “to create a beautiful dress you only need a nice cloth! (...) No

country in the world can boast more beautiful and colorful clothes than our country” (Gnoli, 2017, p.28).

Rosa surrounded herself with capable people of “particular and brilliant intellect (...), who became friends and worked together”: Giulia Veronesi, Raffaello’s best student, Anna Maria Mazzucchelli later editor of Casabella and wife of Carlo Ludovico Argan, and the precious Triestine painter Maria Lupieri who would become the link with another undertake protodesigner from Trieste, Anita Pittoni. Rosa describes with pride her completely artisanal laboratory<sup>7</sup>, using the word “primitive” to underline the handmade approach and the new language that was produced there.

She designs, selects the tones and decides the duration for the immersion of the fabrics in the color, but she also entrusts the work to her team when she has to take maternity leave (Menni Giolli, n.d., v.II, cap.II [1921]). Within domestic walls therefore, she shared with her helpers, skills and a “spiritual penetration” that we believe guided the interpretation of the practices and decorative forms of exotic taste in an almost theosophical sense, a very common line of thinking in the arts during the first decades of the twentieth century (Parisi, 2018), shared by the Giolli couple.

This democratic philosophy that had penetrated the laboratory was dramatically halted with the Fascist regime and even the deportation and death of Raffaello (1945) in Gusen

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7. From the brochure printed to advertise the birth of the Anonymous Company *Le stoffe della Rosa*, we learn that the laboratory still included a limited number of workers as in an artistic laboratory size: five printers, two apprentices, a young lady in charge of the airbrush and another for batik.

II, extermination subfield of Mauthausen, and the execution of their partisan son Ferdinando (Barzaghi, 2006; Mingardo, Caccia). Before that fatal weather, in the still confident 1920s and 1930s the Giollis enthusiasm was seen in their participation in intellectual circles in Milan<sup>8</sup>, from that of Margherita Sarfatti (Barisoni, 2018) to that of the editors Antonietta e Guido Treves who procured numerous commissions for Rosa: among the most prestigious D'Annunzio and several collector friends like Giuseppe Chierichetti who was a cotton merchant willing to support Rosa's atelier by supplying furniture and as an agent for commissions.

Encouraged by the growth of national and international interest for her brand and for guarantee the good health of the laboratory – “now that the production difficulties are overcome and the internal system is perfect” she wrote –, Rosa clearly understood the importance of starting with own business and an autonomous dissemination campaign. To this end, April 18 1925 the brand *Le stoffe della Rosa* became an Anonymous Company. It was printed a program in order to explain the company mission and the aim of finding shareholders willing to support the company and its spread of fame and work increased on Italy and the international market and meantime trying to maintain expressive artistic freedom. All the causes of its future decline are contained in the irreconcilable and contradictory relationship between the artistry and uniqueness of the production (“art batik fabrics, the only

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8. They themselves would have a gathering every Thursday evening, (Menni Giolli, *Una donna fra due secoli*).

ones that are printed in Italy directly from original woods engraved by the artist”), and the ambition, “given the perfect technical elaboration”, to “guarantee every use in the home and in life” of the fabrics and therefore to foresee a large-scale production (*Programma di costituzione*, 1925). The program lists many applications: “upholstery, doors, cushions, furniture and table covers, rugs, tablecloths, clothes” and much more, as well as a long list of exhibitions where those products had distinguished and an equally long list of national and international sales representatives. In short, a pedigree was summarized that was appropriate to the qualitative leap that the company intended to make: organize the national and international sales in a broader and more autonomous way (which should have also led to an increase in production, as was impossible in the artistic meticulous workshop), on the basis of the proud conviction of producing, unique fabrics in the personal and modern batik method or painted and printed fabrics, and riding on the export policy of the National Government of Italian silk production. Heroic project understandable with all its euphoric utopia in the times of the first female emancipation that makes itself strong in offering unique forms and productions such as batiks (Orsi Landini, 1991). Raffaello Giolli professor of art history, critic and writer, in a note written to his wife in 1922 shows all his support to her appealing “little red rose” (referring to the logo with a rose within the oval designed by his wife both used as a signature in the drapes and as a logo in the letterhead of the company), and called “business woman” while he feels himself her “secretary of commerce” engaged in shipments to important magazines such as *Vogue* or between providers and customers.





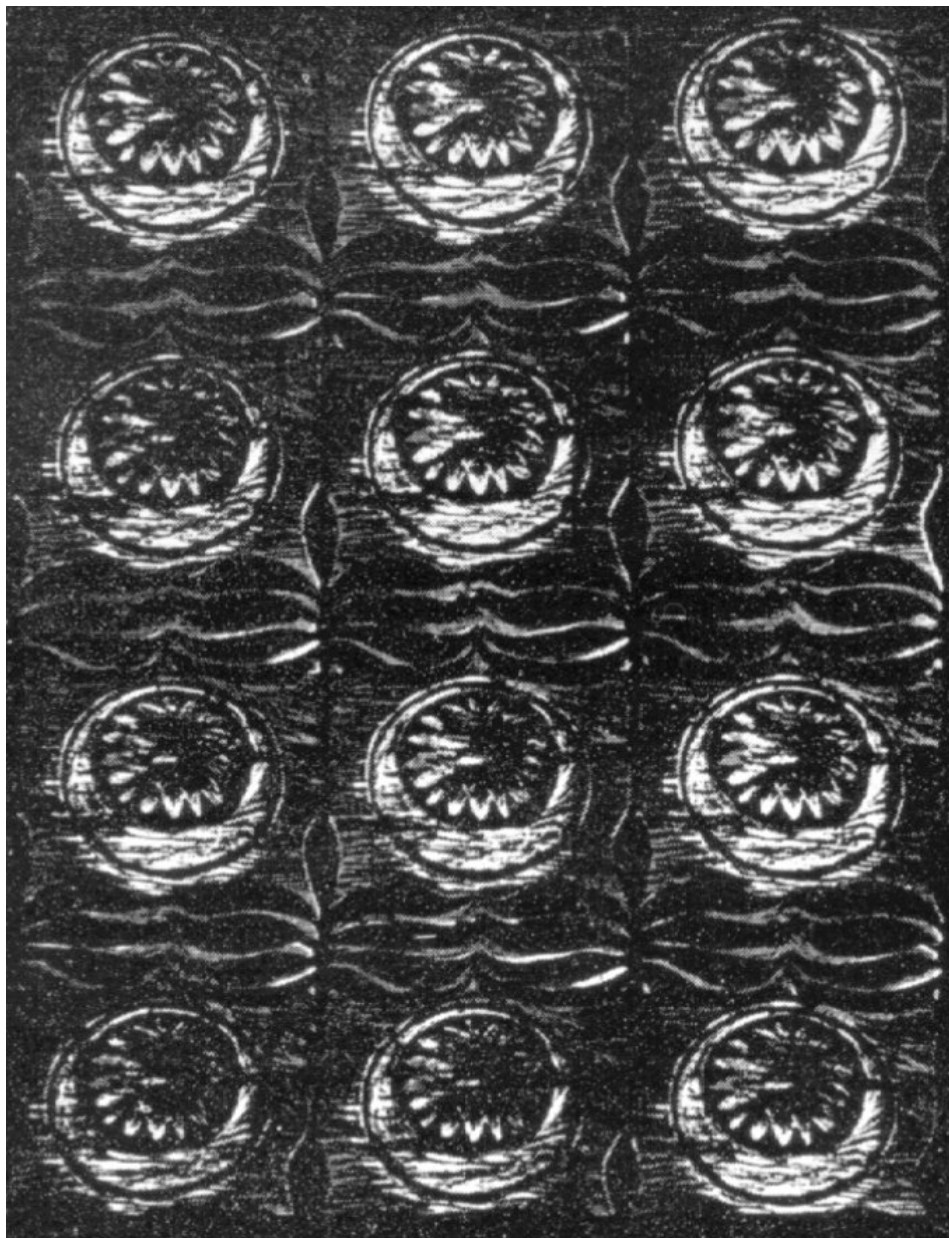
**Figure 13.** Textiles by Rosa Menni Giolli, Lombardia Room at Decorative Arts Exhibition in Monza 1925.

The success obtained by Rosa Menni Giolli printed fabrics at the decorative arts exhibitions contributed to the sudden increase of production. She started from *The Exhibition of the Humanitarian Society* in Milan of 1919 then several personal rooms at the Galleria Pesaro of Milan, at the first exposition of the Monza Biennale in 1923 and also at the second in 1925 (Fig. 13) like the two, for furnishings and clothing, that would earn for her the gold medal at the prestigious Universal Exposition in Paris that same year.

Her batiks and textiles painted with the aerograph in that personal and exotic style ended up in an exceptional variety of places in the mid 1920s: for summer clothes, for fashionable

fashion houses like Ventura (for which Rosa realized the set design in velvet for the small theater – exhibition set). She writes “in the triumphant days of my work in textiles I had as clients not only Ventura but also Palmer, Vogue, Quarti who at that time was the best furniture maker of Milan” (Menni Giolli, n.d.). For Quarti she produced furnishings like cushions and screens, and in 1927 she was working also for Domus Nova of Gio Ponti and Rinascente (Menni Giolli, n.d.). The same year she drew settings for La Scala and for the production of *Diana e la Tuda* by Luigi Pirandello at the Eden Theater. Thanks to Mr. Treves the rooms of the Vittoriale and the wardrobe of D’Annunzio, “robes, kimonos, bedspread”, and a brown velvet tunic for the “mystic creative silents of the Im-maginifico!”, were enriched with Rosa batiks with “a complete universe of suns” previously exhibited in Monza (Fig. 14-15).





**Figure 15.** Rosa Menni Giolli Sun cover. Detail of the sunshade cover made for D'Annunzio. The same motif is visible on one of the walls in Decorative Arts Exhibition in Monza, 1925. From *Emporium*, Vol. LVIII, n. 345, p. 152.

D'Annunzio in a gesture of gratitude invited her to the Vittoriale, which she had to decline because of her advanced stage of pregnancy (Menni Giolli, n.d.)<sup>9</sup>.

In Paris in 1925, the neo-traditionalist Italian pavilion of Armando Brasini, which little satisfied the modern souls had been, according to Raffaello Giolli “providentially saved by the participation of Adolfo Wildt” (Giolli, n.d.). The two had known each other since 1912 when Giolli was the first in Italy to appreciate the sculpture (Giusti, 2007). Their close friendship would lead the critic to choose Wildt as witness at his wedding with Rosa Menni.

Later Rosa’s fabrics completely covered the Parisian rooms (Fig. 16) that hosted the diaphanous or geometrical sculptures by Wildt, an immersive space in the subtle harmony between marble silhouettes and the decoration on the textiles, united by a similar spiritual vitalism and an organic concept of a work of art, without distinctions or hierarchies between major and minor arts. This was the same dialogue that the sculptures of Wildt had established in the 1922 Venice Biennale when displayed alongside the wrought iron works of Mazzucotelli, naturally an affinity not of styles but of value given to the traces and love of hand craftsmanship.

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9. In the archives of the Vittoriale, it seems there is no evident traces left of the commercial relations between the Vate and Rosa Menni Giolli, despite the fact that in her autobiography and in the advertisements, as well as in the Programme for the establishment of the *Società Anonima Le stoffe della Rosa*, it is widely cited. The volumes on fashion and D'Annunzio, in fact, recall tailors and textile personalities that Rosa knew and worked for, like Palmer, do not mention Menni Giolli as the author of specific garments and furnishings such as the fabric of the suns (Andreoli, 1988; Sorge, 2015). It is the author’s intention to deepen this unexplored aspect.



**Figure 16.** Adolf Wildt and Rosa Menni Giolli exhibition room, 1925. Italian Pavillon, The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts Paris. Photo from *Emporium*, 1925, vol. LXII, n. 367, p.29

Therefore, Wildt must have shared that same fundamental philosophy that Rosa stated in her pages: “the artist is not a hypothetical person but a complete one. Lyrical intuition is not an abstraction without weight, rather it is nothing other than a way of knowing”.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Enthusiastic about these ideas, Rosa Menni created her fabrics without consideration for costs, which were always higher than the revenues and always more unsustainable. The attempt to create a public limited company financed by entre-

preneurs with a global distribution failed in the management of the artist «incapable of tying herself to the routine of the work» and the industry, “a festering wound”, as she defined it, that would limit her to a not artistic engraving of her woodblocks “in a way to which her spirit could not conform”. A drastic and cathartic epilogue ensued: once the studio closed, as she recounts in her memoirs, a large blaze destroyed about 450 of her woodblocks, traces of her “long constructive work” (Menni Giolli, n.d., B.6.F.5, p.47). Nothing remained, but the batik of those schools that in 1925, the year of success for Rosa’s artistic batiks, were exhibiting at the Fiera Campionaria in Milan, the examples of Maddalena Da Riva students who used the Kitab method and the predefined repertoires and those that were produced in the school still displayed at the Triennale as artistic craft.

The entrepreneurial effort of experimental genius like Rosa Menni were destined to succumb in the titanic costs and efforts to control the unique product. Who ever more produces, better wins.

Only in the end of 1940s after the painful wartime episodes which gravely struck the Giolli family, would Rosa return to her old passion for textiles with a completely new experience in Vaciago, her country house close to Orta Lake, dedicated to weaving wool from her own farm in the eco of autarchic fashion.

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V

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