

The roaring silk years

by ASSUMPTA DANGLA
Photographs: Esther de Prades Maria

1 *Histoire singulière de l'impression textile.*
Exhibition catalogue. Musée de l'Impression sur Étoffes,
Mulhouse, 2000, p. 137.

2 CANALS, M. T., “Més d'un segle d'estampats”,
in *L'Estampació Tèxtil a Catalunya. Ponsa: art, disseny i indústria. Visions del patrimoni industrial*, 1. Museu de l'Estampació de Premià de Mar, 2006, pp. 37-61.

The Catalan silk printing industry flourished in the 1920s, before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. This was a time of change, with the arrival of the avant-garde and a keenness to break with established artistic norms, echoing the atmosphere on the streets of Europe's major capitals. Prints produced in this period were designed to take art to the mass market, heralding the arrival of a renewed aesthetic. As the artist Sonia Delaunay said¹:

[The creations] will be sold to industrialists, who will examine how to lower the cost of goods sold through industrial production and look at how to boost sales. This will see fashion become democratised, and such a democratisation can only be welcome, as it will raise the general standard.

The emergence of new trends was not limited to the major producers. Some smaller firms, such as *Ponsa* and *La Sedera Franco-Española*, also took an interest.

Ponsa Hermanos

The year 1859 saw the birth of the company formed by the capitalist Josep Ferrer i Vidal, a famous textile magnate, financier and politician, and the printer Josep Ponsa i Rius. In 1879 they founded the general partnership *Hijos de José Ponsa*, which in 1904 would become [*Ponsa Hermanos*](#). The business moved several times, but during this period it was based in Sant Martí de Provençals, where fabrics were prepared, dyed, printed and finished. The company followed a bottom-up development strategy, having previously spun silk and even experimented with silk farming. In 1901 a new site was opened in Palma de Mallorca, known as Ses Sedes, and the factory in Sant Martí became used only for printing².

The legacy of *Ponsa*'s production is conserved in three Catalan museums. The Premià de Mar Textile Printing Museum and the Terrassa Textile Museum and Documentation Centre hold a collection of original designs, samples,



Original design from *La Sedera Franco-Española*, MEPM 5113 (c.1920). [See more.](#)

Printed silk fabrics from the *Ponsa Hermanos* sample book, MEPM 5861 (c. 1920). [See more](#).



³ CARBONELL, Silvia. “La memòria...” In: *Tot plegat. un retrat de la Catalunya tèxtil recent*. CDMT, Museu d’Arenys de Mar, 2016. pp. 28-53.

⁴ Album of original designs by *Ponsa* (1890-1935). MEPM.

clothing and swatches from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which was acquired by the Government of Catalonia and entrusted to the two institutions. These collections were added to with donations from private benefactors. The Barcelona Design Museum, meanwhile, received a donation of ten original sample books from *Jaume Ponsa*, along with wood templates that were passed to the MEPM³. Two sample books from *La Sedera Franco Espanola* have been conserved, together with a selection of designs that are thought to come from the same factory.

Ponsa created prints with the three most common systems in use at the time: woodblock printing, the rotary press and, towards the end of the 1930s, ‘Lyonnaise’ or silk-screen printing. In this early period the three systems operated side by side on the factory floor. Each method had specific features and its own advantages: wood templates were ideal for multi-coloured prints, the copper cylinders of the rotary press produced finely detailed designs, and silk-screen printing made it possible to create *rapports* that were broader in scope. Engraving the templates for woodblock printing required considerable skill. The specialist engravers Costa i Cortada worked for *Ponsa* from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, producing both wood templates and copper cylinders for rotary printing. Templates were also commissioned from specialists outside Catalonia, such as the engraver G. Merklen, based in Mulhouse⁴. The screens for Lyonnaise prints were acquired primarily from suppliers in Premià de Mar, in the province of Barcelona, which was home to a large number of workshops and studios that hand-engraved the glass plates required. Colour was achieved by applying synthetic dyes, such as aniline, and other dyes derived from coal tar, which created vibrant and brightly toned silks.



Printed silk fabrics from the *Ponsa Hermanos* sample book, MEMP 5861 (c. 1920).



Original design by Joan Vidal i Ventosa, MEPM 5723 (1917).

The artisans

⁵ Galeria d'autors. Ruta del Modernisme. Institut Municipal del Paisatge Urbà, Barcelona, 2008, p. 213.

⁶ CARBONELL, S. and CASAMARTINA, J. Josep Palau Oller. *Del Modernisme a l'Art Déco*. CDMT, Terrassa, 2003.

Fashions in Catalonia mirrored those in France. The trend books that arrived from Europe's design capitals, from studios such as *Bilbille & Co* and *Claude Frères*, for example, were the main source of inspiration. Designs were purchased abroad or commissioned from renowned artists at home, and factory directors would often select designs personally, travelling to workshops and design houses outside Spain to see the latest trends for themselves, although only a small proportion of the designs they acquired ever reached the market.

Prominent local designers included Joan Vidal i Ventosa, Josep Palau Oller, Josep Mompou, Enric Moyà, Josep Ferrer Albert, Josep Porta and the staff of *Marsà*. Vidal i Ventosa trained as a painter at La Llotja and studied sculpture with M. Fuxà. He was part of the group of *modernista* artists to frequent Els Quatre Gats, and later Cafè Guayaba, where Picasso, Manolo Hugué, Ismael Smith and Isidre Nonell were regular patrons⁵. Vidal is comparatively little known as a print designer, yet he spent years working in this medium. Josep Palau i Oller, known primarily as a furniture and toy designer, also turned his hand to fabric prints, on occasion working with Josep Mompou, and some surviving original drawings bear the stamps of the two workshops⁶. The extent of Palau's work as a print designer came to light in 2003, leading to the curation of two exhibitions. Much work remains, however, to bring the fabric designs of the other artists in this group to wider public awareness.

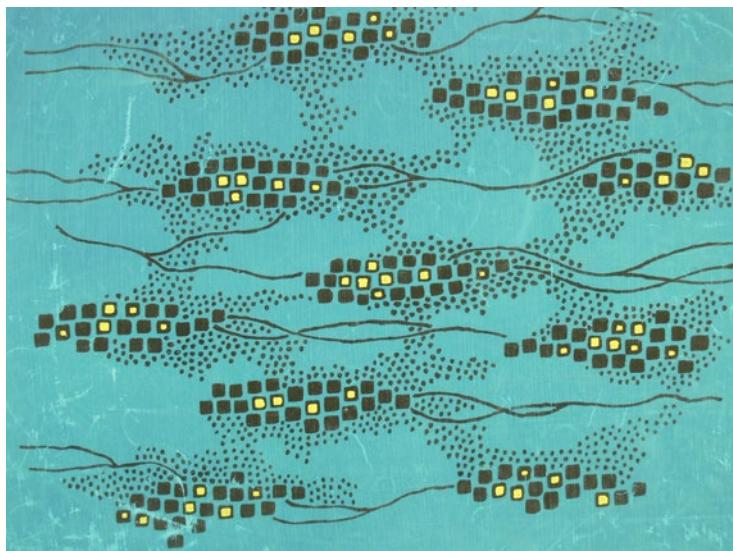
Catalans were quick to adapt to the new artistic trends and produced work which bears comparison with that of their foreign contemporaries, at a time when Catalan art no longer boasted the splendour of the *modernista* period. Looking outside Catalonia, *Ponsa* acquired its designs from artists

Original design by Marsà,
MEPM 641 (1920-1930).



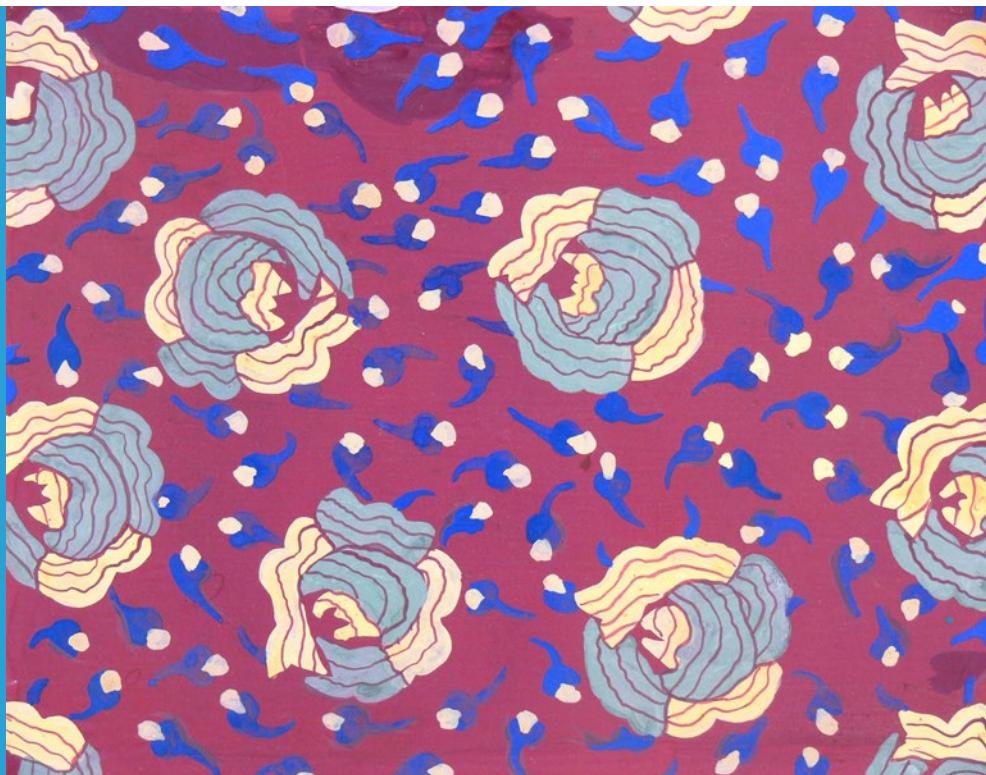
⁷ DANGLA, A. "Art en moviment". In *L'estampació tèxtil a Catalunya. Visions del patrimoni industrial*. Museu de l'Estatampació de Premià de Mar, 2006, pp. 90-95.

in Paris, Lyon and Mulhouse. One of the company's main suppliers was the E. Sins design studio, which also provided designs for other Catalan manufacturers such as *La España Industrial* in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Sins also worked with *La Lió-Barcelona*, which manufactured in Premià de Mar, in the 1920s and 1930s, and regularly received visits from company representatives. Other designers who established long-term working relationships with *La Lió-Barcelona* were C. Lefranc, whose studio was located in Lyon, and [Léon Kittler](#) and René Schrameck, both based in Mulhouse. The full list of designers who supplied to *Ponsa* is particularly long: other foreign contributors were E. P. Bonaparte, Arthur Litt, R. Blaise, J. Berger, Marc Rimaud, Landwerlind, J. Vernaison, Helder, Fred Lévy, R. De Grandclos, Louis Lang, M. Adrouer, Louis Inwiller and Georges Ordatchenko.⁷ Later, in the 1940s, the Barcelona-based studios would come to prominence, with greater input from local designers. This trend gradually increased, and women also came to play a role.



Original design by E. Sins,
MEPM 873 (1922).

Original design by C. Lefranc,
MEPM 2399 (1927).



Art in motion

⁸ POIRET, Paul. *Vistiendo la época*. Parsifal ediciones, Barcelona, 1989, p. 111.

Common decoration included floral, geometric, marine, exotic and figurative motifs. The emergence of the avant-garde called for research, and the era was characterised by exploration on every conceivable level. Paul Poiret, in addition to following the artistic trends of the era, explored the creation of a new aesthetic language with his students at the Atelier Martine⁸:

I created the Atelier Martine for the Decorative Arts [...]. I took in children aged around 12 from the working class neighbourhoods on the outskirts, who didn't go to school. I put aside several rooms in my house for them and had them work naturally, without a teacher [...]. Once the first weeks had passed I obtained marvellous results. These creatures, left to their own devices, quickly forgot the false and empirical precepts that they had been taught at school and rediscovered all of the spontaneity and vitality of their true nature [...]. My role consisted in stimulating their activity and their taste without ever influencing them negatively or criticising them, so that the source of their inspiration remained pure and intact.

Ponsa did not produce only art deco designs; it also created distinctly avant-garde fabrics, encompassing styles as diverse as Simultaneism, Cubism, Russian Constructivism and the abstract forms of De Stijl. Floral motifs took on a new geometric character, emblazoning clothing typified by an explosion of colours and flowing sense of movement. These effects were achieved with overlaid and fragmented designs, geometric shapes and sinuous, abstract forms. The rose was particularly common, transformed into a simplified grouping of two-dimensional segments.



Original designs from the *La Sedera Franco-Española* sample book, MPEM 5113 (c. 1920).

⁹ DUCHARNE, F. *Les folles années de la Soie*. Musée Historique des Tissus. Lyon, 1975. Exhibition catalogue, p. 9.

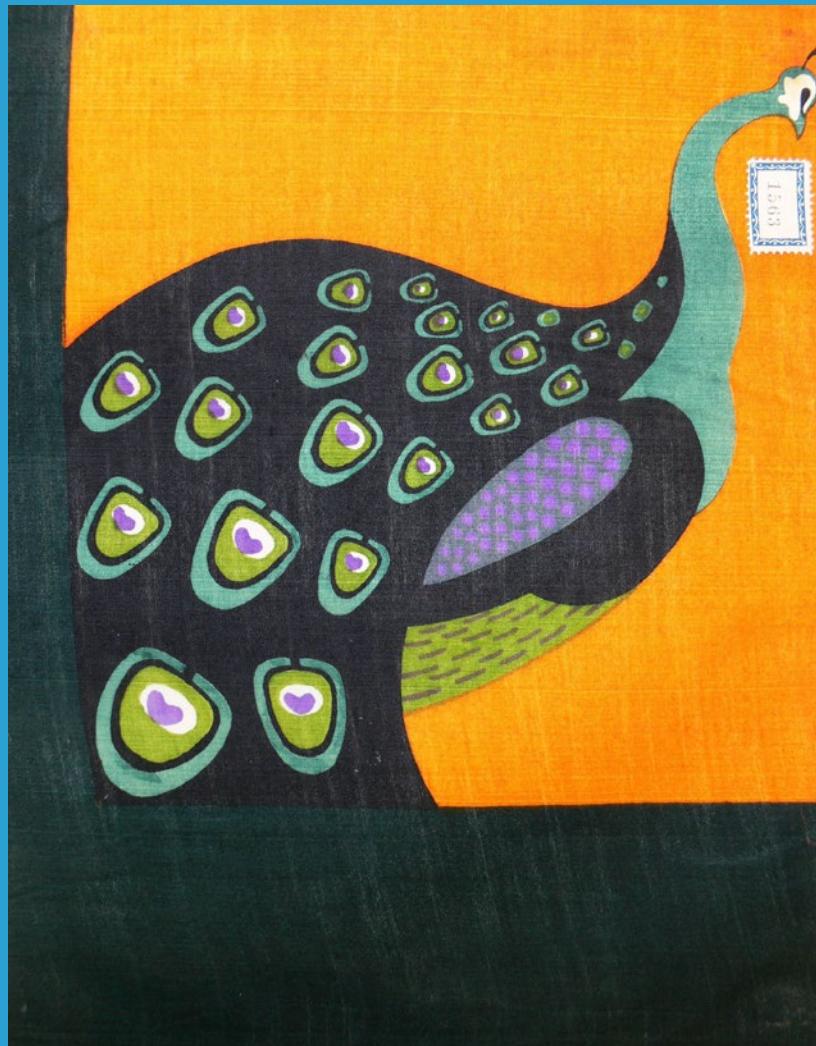
In some pieces, floral and plant motifs took on an aquatic appearance, while [aquatic designs](#) exuded a vegetative quality: jellyfish, urchins, fish, small organisms and a whole series of motifs presented abstractly and reminiscent of aquatic fauna. This is captured in the author Colette's description of curtain fabric⁹:

Yet it is nothing more than velvet cloth and a printed flower. The designer claims, "It is a poppy", and believes it. But I know that, swollen, segmented, delicately fringed and trailing a long, fibrous train, his flower is actually a jellyfish.

The fascination with the East and exoticism, long present in European fabric printing, was also apparent in designs from *Ponsa*. The company produced a whole series of Japanising compositions of refined, stylised forms and a marked sense of movement. It also marketed many designs featuring Egyptian motifs, often used as borders for scarves. Papyrus leaves, pharaohs, jewels and canopic jars brought a visual richness and elegance to the company's new pieces, owing their design to the new forms of the art deco movement.

Original design, anonymous, MEMP 2488 (c. 1920).





Printed silk fabric from the
Ponsa Hermanos sample book,
MEPM 6025 (c. 1920).



Album of originals designs
from *Ponsa*, 1898-1930 MEPM
(unrecorded).



The two surviving sample books from *La Sedera Franco Española* are notable for the prominence given to representations of leisure: shows, music, the wild dance of a cabaret actress dressed as a chambermaid, couples enjoying ballroom dancing, Charlie Chaplin in the role of Charlot, and other scenes of distraction and diversion. There are also scenes depicting women driving, Amazons, tennis players and women in the fashionable outfits of the period. These designs reflect the spirit of an era that has been referred to as “the roaring silk years”, which inspired novel compositions for the decoration of lampshades, screens and scarves in particular.

In the last year restoration work has been completed on an album of original designs from *Ponsa* that has provided new information about the dates of the samples and the designers responsible for them. The reverse of some of the drawings bears the designer's name and a rough chronology, which has helped to establish more precise dates for some of the sample books. The work marks the culmination of efforts to research and recover the memory of *Ponsa* in the golden age of its designs. Through this work we have strived to paint a general picture of the progress so far and of recently launched initiatives, such as a study of the designers and engravers behind the company's output and the relationships that *Ponsa* established outside Catalonia. ●