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Textile as an Affair of State: Decorative Arts and Industry in Argentina (1910-1927)

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Introduction

This article explores textile art through the lenses of social and labor perspectives, with a focus on problematizing its production in early twentieth-century Argentina. The study examines various projects associated with technical education and industry during this period, a time when the State actively supported the decorative arts. This support led to an institutionalization process that integrated projects from the realms of art, education, and industry. The process could be seen especially in the capital city and must be understood after the establishment of key artistic institutions such as the National Museum of Fine Arts (1896), the National Academy of Fine Arts (1905) and the National Salon (1911).

In Buenos Aires, important institutional growth was fostered by the State and the city council, which embraced decorative arts. For example, several public technical schools were founded during the first decades of the twentieth century with the goal of educating workers, artisans, and even future housewives, all of whom depended on this training.[1] At the same time, an area in the National Salons was dedicated to the decorative arts until 1919. Later, specific Salons developed, such as the Salones

[1] In the case of professional schools, sixteen were created at the beginning of the century, with at least three more after 1916. Between 1916 and 1923, thirty-seven arts and crafts schools were created, most of them in urban areas (Puiggrós [2003] 2016, 111). Both "professional" and "arts and crafts" schools were considered "technical schools," but professional schools were more related to artistic and domestic activities.

Nacionales de Artes Decorativas (between 1918 and 1924), in which students from numerous technical schools participated. These events were discontinued in order to not overlap with the Exposiciones Comunales de Artes Aplicadas e Industriales, which showed work by artists, artisans, and houses or small companies dedicated to the applied arts.[2] A few years later, the National Salons was revitalized specifically for "Decorators" (from 1936 to 1943). This reappearance in 1936 took place at the same time as Argentina's participation in applied arts in an international event in 1937 in Paris, at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne. By that time, several projects for the creation of a museum of decorative arts had been proposed, until one of them finally materialized in 1937. All of the events that have been briefly mentioned here demonstrate that the Argentine State had a special interest in the promotion of the decorative arts—decorative arts understood not only as artistic production, but also as a path towards development that extended to the sphere of work.[3] In this sense, this enhancement that articulated art, education, and industry is shown as a transformation regarding to what had been happening since the nineteenth century, where artistic production, especially centered on the fine arts, promoted a civilizational model. The decorative arts, during this era, were perceived positively as a means of progress and potential economic growth for the nation.

Examining the decorative arts requires considering Isabelle Frank's perspective, who noted that the term "decorative arts" was broadly applied to all productions outside the realm of fine arts, particularly between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries (Frank 2000, XI). Frank's insights reveal that despite the diverse terminologies used in Argentina during the first half of the twentieth century, they collectively contributed to a larger agenda: a plan for industrial development.[4]

Interpreting these productions as a collective concept, situated at the intersection of art, craft, and industry, opens up broader inquiries into the motivations behind their creation and the outcomes tied to progress and development. E.P. Thompson's observations emphasize that the impact of factory activity and its time-related changes varied in industrialized versus developing countries and in urban versus rural settings (Thompson 1967). While craft is intricately linked to economics, its creation cannot be reduced solely to the equation of time and efficiency with monetary value in today's world. Considering the synchronized time of factories becomes crucial for understanding these arts. As Glenn Adamson highlights, the

[2] Industrial Exhibitions for Applied and Industrial Arts, 1924-1925, 1926-1927, 1927-1928.

[3] All this process is analyzed in Mantovani, 2023.

[4] The most common terms used for these arts in Argentina were "decorative arts," "applied arts," and "industrial arts," although even "feminine arts" was used in relation to industry on some occasions (see "Artes femininas" 1909, 24-28).

notion of craft was traditionally associated with slowness, even inefficiency (Adamson 2021; also 2013).[5]

This text explores the production of textiles in the early twentieth century, which were characterized by a blend of traditional craftsmanship and emerging industrial techniques. Textiles held significant importance in the decorative arts, driven by both stylistic and technical considerations. They drew inspiration from native cultures, particularly those from the pre-Hispanic past, whose motifs served as a model to cultivate a distinctive national artistic identity. Moreover, these textile projects aimed to reduce reliance on European imports by promoting the use of domestically supported, high-quality materials. This dual focus on cultural heritage and economic self-sufficiency shaped the objectives of these endeavors.

Inevitably, the social, ethnic, and gender dynamics inherent in the creation of these textiles cannot be ignored.[6] While the majority of cultural managers conceptualizing and implementing these projects were affluent men, or sometimes women of high society, the execution of the textiles was predominantly carried out by poor women—specifically, women workers and weavers. These women performed their roles alongside the largely unrecognized, but essential, domain of housework.

Within this context, this text addresses several key inquiries. It delves into the role of textiles in projects promoting the decorative arts, explores the intentions behind these initiatives, assesses their outcomes, and examines the intricate social, ethnic, and gender relationships forged among participants in textile production and exhibition projects. While the primary focus is on these questions, the aim is not to

[5] When using the term "industry," the ideas of Eileen Boris come to mind. Boris explained a difference in the United States economy compared to what was identified in the UK: the latter was produced by a symbiotic relationship between the factory system and domestic work (Boris 1994, 10). In this same sense, we can consider that the concept of industry in Argentina at that moment did not have a fixed meaning but was rather in constant definition, with a significant domestic and artisanal component. The history of industry during this period in Argentina has been examined from various perspectives, including economics (Rocchi 1998; Belini 2008, 2017) and through the social and cultural history of workers (Rocchi 1999, 2000; Lobato 2007; Koppmann 2022). It is important to note that even though Argentina initiated its most significant industrialization in 1930 with Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI), during the 1920s and a few years prior, there is evidence of an interest in the flourishing of the so-called "artistic industries."

[6] The main reference and pioneer in the field of craft and gender studies is Parker (1984). Studies on textiles in Argentina have been diverse; many of them trace their origins back to pre-Columbian times or explore current productions within a broader temporal context, often in relation to the rest of the Andes. Ruth Corcuera's works are also crucial references (Corcuera 1995; 2015). Additionally, some texts with a more regional focus have addressed textiles, particularly differences in regions or provinces of present-day Argentina. Worth mentioning for this article are works by Bassetti de Rocca (1998), Paz and Carballo (2005), and Bovisio (2016).

arrive at exhaustive answers, but rather to present potential avenues for solutions, generating new perspectives and initiating further exploration.

Rojas, Burgos, Onelli: The First Discourses and Actions on Textiles

The Centenary of the May Revolution in 1910 marked a pivotal moment, bringing about a departure from the ideas of the end of the nineteenth century. The so-called "Generation of the 80s"—in which the Argentine State devoted itself to expanding its borders at the expense of the lands of the indigenous peoples that inhabited the territory, with the well-known slogan that opposed civilization to barbarism—was on its way out. In contrast, the proposals of the intellectuals of the Centennial were pioneering in their defense of a cultural nationalism which turned attention to the roots and exaltation of the indigenous people and nativist motifs, while encouraging the development of a national history for the integration of the immigrants through the educational system.[7]

Among the intellectuals of the "Centennial Generation" who were advocating for this cultural nationalism, Ricardo Rojas (1882-1957), a key figure shaping guidelines for national art, stands out (Devoto 2005). Rojas, born in Tucumán, played a crucial role in the development of ideas that extended throughout the Southern Cone. Notably, he introduced the concept of *Eurindia*, signifying the fusion of Europe and the Americas into something entirely new.[8] According to Rojas, this amalgamation would give rise to an original art that simultaneously embodied national and continental identities.

In his lectures at the University of Tucumán (in northwest Argentina) in 1914, Rojas emphasized the significance of the region's geography, particularly its strong connection to the Andes (Rojas 1915). This geographical context, he argued, served as a crucial foundation for the emergence of a national art drawing from the motifs of indigenous civilizations (see Fasce 2021).[9] In this setting, Rojas proposed the establishment of a school of applied arts for industry, aiming to derive inspiration from the productions of pre-Hispanic cultures skilled in ceramics and textiles. Rojas's

[7] Ricardo Rojas' renowned text, *La restauración nacionalista* (1910), is an important reference in this case. Although it will not be addressed here, it was a report on education requested by the Ministry of Public Instruction and designed to encourage the foundation of an Argentine identity, in the words of Fernando Devoto (Devoto 2005, 65).

[8] The Americas, or the Indies, as Europeans initially called America. It is worth mentioning that "America" was the term used at the time to refer to the Americas, reinforcing the idea of unity on a single continent.

[9] Since the end of the nineteenth century, Northwest Argentina has been a region of systematic archaeological excavations. The most significant hypotheses from these excavations aimed to support the importance of a pre-Inca civilization known as "Calchaquí". This, combined with other factors, has made the Northwest a privileged territory for the recovery of "nativist" art (Fasce 2021).

vision diverged from the promotion of "pure" arts, focusing instead on what he deemed "useful" arts that could contribute to the advancement of "modern industry" (Rojas 1915), aligning closely with applied arts.

Rojas contended that textiles had thrived during the colonial period. The Spaniards, upon arrival, preserved looms and continued "working the indigenous motifs" (Rojas 1915, 127-128). However, with the Revolution and the influx of English products incorporating machinery into looms, the arts of these original guilds, once protected by their monopoly, faced destruction. Rojas proposed that these traditional economies could be "reborn inside a new industrial technique, for pleasure or beauty" (1915, 127-128). A decade later, in his *Silabario de la decoración americana*, Rojas echoed similar sentiments, emphasizing the importance of existing research on criollo textiles, although he did not cite specific studies (Rojas [1930] 1953).[10]

One such study, likely *Alfombras, tapices i tejidos criollos* (1916) by Clemente Onelli, revealed the existence of Creole fabrics dating back to the first century of the conquest. Onelli demonstrated that the Spaniards had developed this industry "without sacrificing the vigorous indigenous tradition" (Rojas [1930] 1953, 75, 225).[11] Rojas, through Onelli, argued that contemporary weaving retained the essence of the delicate art of the past, which could find a place in a modern economy: "In today's industry, elements of technique and pre-Columbian style still subsist, euro-indigenously merging with elements of Spanish tradition" (Rojas [1930] 1953, 224).

Rojas acknowledged Fausto Burgos's research (Medinas, 1888–San Rafael, 1953), even though he did not mention the specific title. It is speculated that the work referred to may be *Tejidos incaicos y criollos* (1927), co-authored with his wife María Elena Catullo (La Plata, 1894–San Rafael, 1957). In this publication, the authors studied Inca and Creole weavings in Bolivian and Peruvian collections under the directive of the executive power and the Minister of Public Instruction of Argentina. The State considered textiles a significant affair. As the introductory passage of the report indicated: "We believe this work will be a valuable guide for teachers who wish to learn how to weave ponchos, shawls, yacollas, chusis, chumpish, etc., in the Incan style. This will enable them to later teach these techniques to their students…" (Burgos [1925] 1927, 7).[12] The research not only strengthened the connection between Argentina and the Andes but also recovered colonial sources and explored the socio-

[10] Although published in 1930, the draft of the *Silabario* is from 1925 and has undergone very few changes from its original version.

[11] Criollo or Creole refers to people born in the Americas, descendants of Europeans during the colonial period. In this case, it refers to a textile made using techniques from that period. All translations in this paper are by the author.

[12] As the draft for Rojas's *Silabario* is from 1925, it may be based on research by Burgos that I have not identified yet, or Rojas may have read it before its publication.

cultural significance of textiles in the Inca Empire. Moreover, it presented a detailed study of the technical variations in textiles throughout the region.

This government's interest in textiles was not new; the 1914 Industrial Census had already emphasized the need to stimulate weaving and yarn production, prevalent in many provinces across the country. This urgency stemmed from the potential competition, not just in cost but also in durability (República Argentina 1917, 77). With the onset of the First World War, there was a heightened necessity to enhance the textile industry, not just for commercial reasons but also to replace products that were no longer being imported. Historian Claudio Belini notes that by 1923, 73 percent of the textiles consumed were imported, highlighting the urgency for self-sufficiency (Belini 2008, 33). While economic and artistic production were only partially intertwined during this period, similar challenges were evident—namely, the imperative to replace imported goods and attract consumers with domestically-produced, high-quality items. The emphasis on an art of national identity and the belief that indigenous motifs could enhance and provide originality to the artistic industry were central to the discourse on decorative arts. In this context, textiles were strategically vital for national artistic development.

Onelli played a pivotal role in textile studies in Argentina during the mentioned period, as highlighted by Rojas. Originally an Italian naturalist visiting Argentina to study fossils, Onelli eventually became the director of the Buenos Aires Zoo.[13] He also collaborated with indigenous communities during his travels, assisting them in acquiring lands.[14] Moreover, he spearheaded various projects for establishing textile schools and factories.

While Onelli was a significant contributor to these activities, he was not the only one. Correspondence in Rojas's archive reveals his friendship with Onelli. Simultaneously, he closely collaborated with governors such as Ernesto Padilla of Tucumán, Ramón Cárcano of Córdoba,[15] the mayor of Buenos Aires, Carlos Noel, and a prominent women's organization, specifically a part of the Liga Patriótica Argentina. This organization actively promoted weaving initiatives inspired by Onelli's ideas.

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[13] There are a few studies that have partially addressed Onelli and his activities regarding textiles (Corsani and Barbat 2007; Pegoraro 2017). Graciela Scocco (2005) analyzed textile exhibitions that took place in Tucumán and Córdoba. Onelli's archive is housed at the library of Buenos Aires Zoo (now "Ecoparque") and is not open to consultation at the moment.

[14] This was especially true for the Patagonian region and was very common at that time, with the purpose of transforming the nomadic practices of the natives into sedentary ones, thereby aiming to make them more "civilized" (see Onelli 1917).

[15] This relationship likely began with the project of constructing zoos in those provinces (Onelli 1915, 357-361).

One of the most intriguing facets of projects like Onelli's is the extensive network they established with different provinces and the inclusion of producers beyond the workers and artisans of Buenos Aires, the focal point of Argentina's industrial development. Onelli, being a notable figure in these matters, delivered various lectures, including some directed at students. He criticized them for opting for "doctorates" instead of pursuing careers in the industry (Onelli 1918, 175).

During this period, there was widespread dissatisfaction with students showing excessive interest in liberal professions rather than pursuing technical careers or creating small industrial projects—what Onelli referred to as "small industries." He acknowledged that these small industries could either be pursued as pastimes during leisure hours or become a form of personal work leading to independence from the burdens of hard labor (Onelli 1917, 8).

While Onelli provided no definitive guide to creating successful projects, he actively encouraged students and workers to explore new possibilities. His insights into the potential of the countryside and various provinces, distinct from urban settings, drew not only from his experiences with zoo animals but also reflected his deeply practical nature: As Onelli himself wrote "if you lived in the countryside and especially in the provinces, I could perhaps suggest something newer and more immediately useful" (Onelli 1917, 18).

In this context, it is noteworthy that Onelli was a prolific writer and lecturer. In 1923, he delivered a significant lecture calling for cotton cultivation. More importantly, his earlier work, the *Cartilla de la tejedora provinciana* (1921), offers crucial insight into the intersection of the rural world and textile activity. This booklet aimed to engage in a friendly "conversation" with weavers, particularly rural women, with the expectation that improved work could enhance their living standards. Onelli expressed the hope that better work would enable these women to afford more meat and "buy medicine when ill, instead of using home remedies or *curanderas* that are useless" (Onelli 1921, 29). The *Cartilla* compiled information about dyeing "recipes," extracting color from different plants, a practice later echoed in other texts like that of Burgos (Onelli 1921, 29). These natural recipes were proposed as a substitute for industrial dyes, which had become common but were less durable in color. The primary intention was to preserve the tradition of certain practices and resist innovation.

Simultaneously, Onelli informed the weavers that women from Buenos Aires were interested in their "beautiful" work, but for greater visibility and purchase, it was necessary to send textiles to the capital city. This led Onelli to suggest that women from Buenos Aires would start "helping" the weavers make their work known in the

capital city and increase sales there (Onelli 1921, 6). These women were associated with the Junta Ejecutiva de Señoras of the Liga Patriótica Argentina and the *Cartilla* was specially dedicated to its president: Hortensia Berdier.[16]

The women's commissions of the Liga Patriótica Argentina merit additional research, but it is important to point out that they participated intensely in the creation of numerous schools inside important factories (Bagley and Avanti, among others). In these schools, working women learned to read, write, and how to do basic domestic activities. They also acquired religious knowledge while singing patriotic hymns. Elisa del Campillo, vice-president of the National Commission of Young Ladies quoted María Gaston, a working woman, in her speech: "There [in the schools] we have learned to know a God we ignored, the homeland we did not know, the first letters those of us who were not lucky enough to go to school, to sew our dresses, to embroider, to weave, in short, to be useful and happy women, loving God, the Homeland and working with joy" (Del Campillo 1922, 5).

In addition to the activity of patriotism, there is no doubt that the mission of this conservative organization was also to propose an alternative to the mobilization inside the factories promoted by the leftist organizations, called "subversive" by del Campillo herself. Although no precise justification has been found so far as to why the promotion of textiles was prioritized over other artistic exhibition practices, it is possible to think that this production could accompany the working woman in the factory, the rural artisan or an upper-class woman who could entertain herself in her free time with the activity of weaving in an idle way.

The textiles resulting from this project incorporated elements of the pre-Hispanic tradition but were typically crafted contemporaneously. While these practices may currently be viewed as appropriations of motifs from aboriginal cultures, and while the recovery of these decontextualized motifs has been widely criticized (see Bovisio 2015), it is essential to recognize the complexity of the situation. In many cases, these motifs were embraced by the native *teleras* themselves. Onelli's proposal, in collaboration with the women of the Liga Patriótica Argentina, directly engaged rural communities, aiming to sustain a project for the future. This approach considered not only the indigenous motifs from the past but also the contemporary work of these communities, as will be further discussed in the next section. The ideas

[16] Hortensia Berdier (1862-1938) was also a painter who studied in Paris and with Reinaldo Giudici in Buenos Aires (Fara 2021). Several works devoted to the Liga Patriótica Argentina analyze in depth the different projects and activities carried out by this organization (Caterina 1995; McGee Deutsch 2003). In 1916, the first popular party (Unión Cívica Radical) had won the initial elections with universal male suffrage, and it should be noted that the women's organization of the Liga was also chaired by a man, Manuel Carlés. As the twentieth century progressed, the Liga aligned itself with conservative ideas.

explored in this narrative align with some of the pioneering texts and early systematic research that sought to establish a scientific understanding of textiles. The attention focused on the past was intended to promote these textile practices in the present, showcasing how these ideas were applied in the articulation between the capital city and different provinces (Onelli 1921; Bovisio 2015).

No Time for Leisure: Learning, Working, and Exhibiting

1. Learning

The Argentine State's initiative to provide technical education for artists, artisans, and workers stands in contrast to the emergence of numerous private schools for female education in the late nineteenth century. These schools, established by upper-class women, can be viewed as part of philanthropic efforts aimed at "saving" women from factory work, representing a "non-confrontational continuation of female work" (Trasforini for Europe 2007, 101; see Gluzman for Argentina 2016).

During the early decades of the twentieth century, technical education expanded in Argentina, encompassing fields such as weaving, carpentry, plastering, and drawing. Seven professional public schools for women were established in Buenos Aires, as well as in Tucumán, Córdoba, La Plata, Salta, Santiago del Estero, San Fernando (Buenos Aires province), La Rioja, and Concepción del Uruguay around 1918.[17] Simultaneously, initiatives led by women in private organizations and men from industrial and academic spheres continued. Examples include projects by the Sociedad de Educación Industrial (since 1900) and significant artistic institutions like the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes (since 1908-1910) and the Escuela de Artes Decorativas e Industriales at the Universidad Provincial de Tucumán (1916), demonstrating a growing interest in providing such instruction (Fasce 2021, 53-90; Fasce & Mantovani 2023). Noteworthy in the field of weaving were institutions like the Escuela de Telares a Mano in the Parque Patricios neighborhood of Buenos Aires, and the one at the Buenos Aires Zoo, the Escuela Municipal de Telares Domésticos (1920 and 1921 respectively), fostered by Onelli. Additionally, the Escuela Profesional de Belén (Catamarca), specializing in regional weaving, operated around 1934-1935.

An image from that era captures women during an awards ceremony at the entrance of the Parque Patricios establishment (Fig. 1). Identified authorities in attendance include Carlos Noel, the mayor of Buenos Aires, and Clemente Onelli, the institution's founder (labeled 1 and 2, respectively). The façade, adorned with classical elements and sculptures referencing antiquity, features a Latin phrase at the door:

[17] I highlight these and not the so-called "arts and crafts schools" [*escuelas de artes y oficios*]—also of a technical nature—given that those were usually for men, and their content was far removed from the so-called "artistic industries."

"DOMO MANSIT, LANAM FECIT" ["Stayed at home, spun wool"], linking the act of spinning and weaving to domestic life.[18] Typically, students entered these courses or public schools at ages twelve to fourteen, normally requiring primary education.[19] Participants were predominantly young, lower-class men and women, who faced challenges in attending classes but endeavored to do so. Consequently, the completion of their studies was sometimes compromised. Many students, even armed with limited knowledge, could quickly secure better employment or enhance their income, leading to a decreased incentive to continue their education due to increased work commitments.

Figure 1: Clemente Onelli, Carlos Noel, students and public at the entrance of the loom school in Parque Patricios (Archivo General de la Nación, dpto. docs fotográficos, n. inv. 188112).

For instance, the irregular attendance of students was noted in the Sociedad de Educación Industrial's memoirs, where it mentioned that "most of them are workers who leave their daily work late and live far from the School" (Sociedad de Educación Industrial 1902, 19). The schools within this establishment were segregated by gender. Men learned subjects like metallurgy, radio, and ornamental drawing, while women focused on pyrography, embroidery, and lacemaking, along with visits to Ethnographic museums and the Zoo to enhance their work related to flora, fauna, or pre-Hispanic motifs. According to the same sources, the girls attending this society were mostly from the middle class. It was considered undesirable for these women to

[18] This phrase has been analyzed and translated from various epitaphs of Roman women from antiquity (see López 2010, 161).

[19] This was the case for the *escuelas profesionales* that depended on the national government. It is possible to ascertain this requirement because there were specific regulations (Figueroa Alcorta & Zeballos, 1910). However, nothing similar has been found for the *telares* schools.

be seen working, particularly in factories. In the last few decades of this establishment, and particularly in private education, their instruction was more often associated with leisure, emphasizing activities like embroidery over practical skills like darning.[20]

Another photograph of the awards ceremony featuring the same personalities provides a glimpse inside the school with its female students and audience (Fig. 2).[21] Most of the young women, wearing hats, appear to be older than twelve or fourteen years old. In the background, you can identify tools for making wool balls (*ovilladores*) and at least one loom (there were likely more, but they might have been removed for the event). Additionally, to the right of the image, one can see stacks of finely woven pieces with fringed ends, which are notable for their delicate nature.

Figure 2: Clemente Onelli, Carlos Noel, students, and public at the loom school in Parque Patricios (Archivo General de la Nación, dpto. docs fotográficos, n. inv. 188108).

In the last photograph (Fig. 3), five students, including Clemente Onelli (the man in the bowler hat), are captured alongside two unidentified men. The photograph, according to information on its reverse side, indicates that they are also situated at the loom school in the Parque Patricios neighborhood. The composition of the image is deliberate and staged, as evidenced by the students' direct gaze at the camera. The students appear to be of varying ages. Their collaborative effort is focused on a horizontally arranged narrow piece. Interestingly, the looms employed

[20] Specialists had been talking about this problem since the nineteenth century: "the poor girl must learn to darn; the rich girl can embroider with gold threads" (Larrain 1882 cit. Bottarini 2012, 118).

[21] The number of actual students among them is unknown, and the role of the Daughters of Charity visible in the front row in the picture is also unclear.

in this setting deviate from the Creole style and instead bear resemblance to the European loom model.[22]

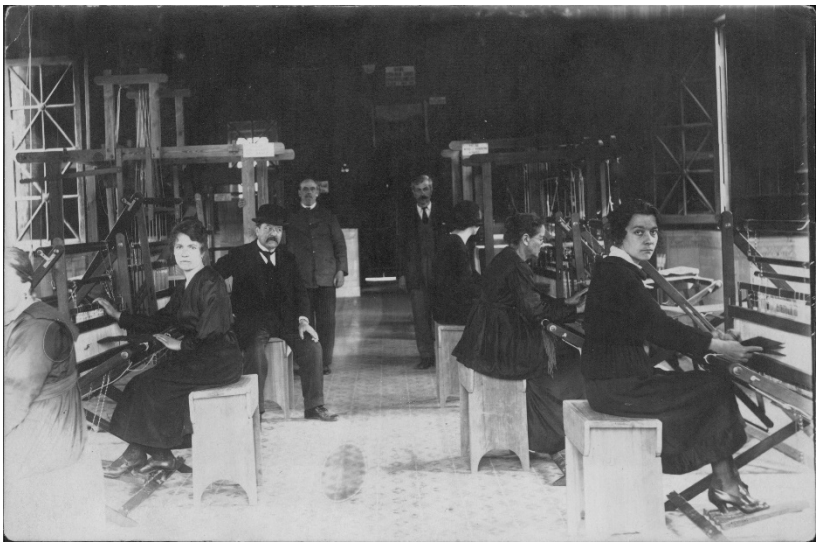


Fig. 3. Clemente Onelli and students at the loom school in Parque Patricios (Archivo General de la Nación, dpto. docs fotográficos, n. inv. 188105).

Limited information is available regarding their instructional approach. Although the visuals depict men in the photographs and no female instructors, scant documentation suggests that Onelli orchestrated the relocation of weavers from various northern provinces of Argentina to Buenos Aires. This move aimed to ensure a more "autochthonous" style of teaching that could be disseminated nationwide (Ruspi 1917, 40).[23] Despite the scarcity of details, a photograph (Fig. 4) portrays weaving activities transitioning from a school setting to an outdoor environment.[24] In this setting, Onelli is once again captured facing the camera, seemingly participating in a demonstration of women's weaving practices.

Two women are engaged in weaving simultaneously, with one more discernible than the other. Although the latter remains unidentified, her hairstyle and attire distinguish her from the others present, who are often wearing hats and furs while assuming roles as observers and assistants. These individuals likely belong to a

[22] I would like to thank Roxana Amarilla and Celestina Stramigioli for helping me to identify these looms.

[23] The only contemporary critical remark regarding this practice was made by the socialist Julio V. González. He commented that he would not relocate the weavers from Vinchina (La Rioja) to Buenos Aires; instead, he advocated for bringing schools from Buenos Aires to the weavers in Vinchina (González 1922). With this statement, he underscored the importance of establishing schools, promoting education, and creating employment opportunities in the province rather than concentrating them in the capital city. This stance differentiated his ideas from the projects advocated by Onelli.

[24] The presence of trees and outdoor surroundings suggests that it could be the zoo directed by Onelli, where an Escuela de Telares [Weaving School] was also located. Cristina Giordano mentions a weaver, Ramona Risso Patrón de Beristayn, from Catamarca, who went to Buenos Aires with Onelli. However, as of now, no information regarding this connection has been found (Giordano 2014, 23).

different social class, possibly possessing different customs. The spectators, presumed to be members of the Liga Patriótica, appear to have embraced Onelli's ideas, initiating textile exhibitions in the 1920s.

The image below (Fig. 4) suggests the use of a Creole loom (Giordano 2014, 57) for a broader weaving pattern, requiring the collaboration of two individuals for increased efficiency and comfort.[25] The strategic transfer of weavers to Buenos Aires served the purpose of demonstrating textile weaving techniques to young students. This instructional method underscored the significance of traditional knowledge held by skilled weavers, providing students with role models to emulate. Additionally, the dispersal of weavers to various regions of the country ensured the preservation of weaving traditions. The weaver's presence as the primary instructor reinforced the essence of this teaching approach, emphasizing the cultural continuity and authenticity of the craft.

Figure 4: Women weaving for an audience outdoors
(Archivo General de la Nación, box 2553).

A story told by Clemente Onelli sheds light on the experiences of a graduate from the loom school at the Buenos Aires Zoo, situated near Parque Patricios. The story illustrates the opportunities provided by the school and the challenges that lower-class young women faced in balancing various responsibilities. It emphasizes the difficulty for women in this social stratum to engage in activities beyond traditional household chores:

> One day I went to give a job to a girl of more than modest social position who had graduated in the first course of the previous year. She lived with her parents in two meager rooms in a *conventillo* in Buenos Aires. The children went to school; the father, who was sick, did not get more than 40 pesos a month, and her bedridden mother required constant care. The family's living

[25] Perhaps they are making a *poncho*, which can be done in pieces and then united through sewing in the middle.

> space was cramped, with beds pushed against the walls. In these challenging conditions, the young graduate, armed with a small loom valued at a few pesos and occupying a mere 60-centimeter space, diligently wove cloths. She juggled her weaving work with attending to her ailing mother and managing household chores.
>
> She told me that with approximately five hours of daily work and an expenditure of one peso eighty on cotton, she could produce fourteen towels. She sold these towels on the block for thirty cents each, a price lower than any flea market in her neighborhood. This venture earned her a daily income just above three pesos, more than she could earn by working eight hours outside her home and having to pay the tram fare (Onelli 1922, 165-166).

The graduate's responsibilities were multifaceted. Her domestic duties consumed significant time, given her role in caring for her parents and younger siblings, likely influenced by societal expectations related to gender and age. These tasks, however, did not generate any income. In contrast, her weaving skills allowed her to create cloths cost-effectively, providing a source of income. Indeed, her products were more affordable than the average, posing competition in offering the cheapest goods.[26] Unlike women from higher social classes who could afford leisure and embroidery, her time outside familial obligations was dedicated to economic pursuits. Despite the absence of conclusive evidence, it remains challenging to determine if the small cloth in the story resembles the one depicted in Fig. 3. Unfortunately, no final versions of these works have survived, leaving some ambiguity in understanding the exact nature of these woven items.

Regarding other provinces, Julio V. González remarked in a newspaper article that in towns such as Vinchina in La Rioja, every family had its own weaving loom. He noted that this activity was manageable for women alongside their household chores. In fact, it was observed that even "little shepherd girls" engaged in spinning wool while tending to goats (González 1922). Despite this, it is evident that many of these young women, belonging to a particular social stratum, were not inclined to learn embroidery or adopt the role of a middle-class housewife, nor was such training provided by schools. Instead, their objective was to acquire minimal training to sustain their existing work and enhance the conditions of their daily lives, albeit modestly.

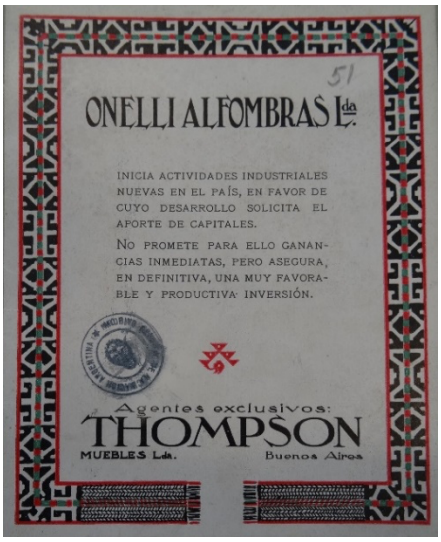
[26] In the case of Argentina, Mirta Lobato has pointed out that women had lower salaries, often because their earnings constituted an additional contribution to the household rather than the primary income (Lobato 2007). In the context of the arts and crafts movement, Jan Marsh's article revisits the craftsmen's concern about female artisans who could offer their work for much lower wages than their male counterparts, often because they did not have families to support (Marsh [2002] 2018, 36).

2. Working

Concurrently with the proliferation of educational institutions, a noteworthy project unfolded in northern Argentina, spearheaded by Onelli in collaboration with Governors Cárcano (Córdoba) and Padilla (Tucumán). This initiative involved the establishment of a factory dedicated to the production of diverse types of utilitarian and ornamental rugs. Unfortunately, the exact location of this factory remains unrecorded in provincial archives.

An undated brochure sheds light on the carpet industry project under the name "Onelli Alfombras Lda". The accompanying text, adorned with captivating tapestry images showcasing various styles (refer to Figs. 5-7), contains intriguing details. The brochure incorporates two distinct fonts. The first, seemingly an imitation of Onelli's handwriting, provides instructions on the content: "Say whatever you want […] but do not forget to mention that Australia, which cannot sell its wool, has resolved to transform it within its own country through the manufacturing of textiles and carpets" (Onelli n/d.a). The initial page of this promotional material prominently features the name "Thompson Buenos Aires," signifying the involvement of this significant furniture enterprise in the venture.

The text itself articulates an appeal to potential investors, emphasizing the venture's realistic outlook: while immediate gains are not promised, the investment is guaranteed to be both favorable and productive (Onelli n/d.a). Originally conceived as a modest artisanal workshop specializing in hand-knotted tapestries with local motifs and Creolean craftsmanship, the project aspired to become a nation-wide enterprise. Regrettably, the venture faced challenges, with insufficient buyers and capital hindering its growth. Despite these obstacles, multiple individuals were actively engaged at this juncture, contributing to the ongoing development of the project.



Figures 5-7: Brochure of Onelli's rug factory. Cover; "modern"; "colonial"; "Pampa" and "Araucano" styles (Archivo General de la Nación, box 2553).

Although the design encompassed various styles, there is discernible alignment with Rojas's concepts, reflecting an intention to revive pre-Hispanic or "nativist" elements prominent in the region's decorative arts (Fig. 7). These elements were envisioned to serve as a distinctive mark of local production, rooted in the pursuit of constructing a "national" art and style. This innovation deviated from previous revivals in Europe that sought improvement by drawing inspiration from exotic cultures. Instead, the revival drew from a shared past in the Americas (see Gutiérrez and Gutiérrez Viñuales 2000).

However, the catalog indicated that, with the support of various businessmen, Onelli and his associates opted not to impose a specific style on buyers. Instead, they produced trendier styles (European and Eastern) and offered others on request. This implies that styles with "American" or pre-Hispanic influences had not been completely successful. Thus, the "nativist" ideal succumbed to the commercial

strategy necessary for the factory's survival and growth. Simultaneously, the brochure suggested that having a national factory mitigated issues related to interpreting orders sent from distant locations, or with handling more complex matters, such as the entry of foreign products subject to taxes that increased the appeal of locally made garments (Onelli n/d.a).

The names of individuals endorsing this venture were prominently featured in the publication, a clear indication of support likely intended to encourage further participation. The signatories included Enrique Thompson, Samuel H. Pearson, Ramón J. Cárcano, Antonio Santamarina, Pedro Bercetche, J. M. Paz Anchorena, Carlos Alberto Acevedo, Enrique Erdwig, Clemente Onelli, and Carlos Lumb (Onelli n/d.a)—governors, entrepreneurs, art collectors, and others.

These initiatives aimed not only to promote local and regional production but eventually to supplant foreign consumption, a prospect that captured the interest of Buenos Aires elites.[27] However, the upper classes in the capital showed limited enthusiasm for national products, insufficient to curtail competition with European products. Additionally, textile production emphasizing pre-Hispanic motifs and traditional techniques struggled to fully adapt to mass industrial production and its synchronized stages. This was intentional, as the emphasis on craftsmanship and artistry made the project somewhat romantic, as confirmed by Onelli in the brochure (Onelli n/d.a). Consequently, these projects did not fully materialize as intended, but are still crucial for analyzing the explorations, advancements, and setbacks in the creation of an art linked to the industry.

Artistic projects from this period often involved significant artisanal and manual work, with machines viewed not as the ultimate goal, but rather sometimes considered negatively.[28] Unfortunately, information on the functioning of the manufacturing system is not available, but insights into the treatment, hierarchies, and reception of weavers (particularly women) and their textiles can be gleaned from various exhibitions, particularly those held in Buenos Aires.

3. Exhibiting

In the burgeoning landscape of decorative arts in Buenos Aires around 1918, the Salón Nacional de Artes Decorativas played a pivotal role in elevating their significance. This venue boasted a higher representation of women exhibitors

[27] The Argentine elites, especially those from Buenos Aires, had substantial incomes and were accustomed to traveling to Europe, as well as purchasing foreign artwork, which they preferred to national art (Baldasarre 2006; Losada 2008).

[28] Regarding applied and industrial arts exhibitions, an interesting comment emerges: "In our country, many artistic ironworks are emerging, and for the benefit of national art, we hope they do not become overly industrialized" (F. M. 1927, 65).

compared to other permanent expositions like the Salón Nacional, which primarily focused on fine arts and thus had fewer female participants. Onelli actively contributed to the organization of these spaces, collaborating with other influential figures in the realms of arts and culture.

While some of the Onelli company's carpets were prominently featured in the exhibitions of 1918 and 1919, it appears that he did not receive any awards for his "collective" works. Nevertheless, critical acclaim accompanied his contributions. Despite participating in multiple events, no textile items have been uncovered so far. However, one exhibition stands out, featuring a motif matching one found in the brochure with color results (see Figs. 8-9). In this particular display, Aztec elements intricately combine with the coat of arms of Charles V, demonstrating that these models displayed in the catalog were indeed produced.

In a personal document, Onelli acknowledged the pivotal role played by the Liga Patriótica and its initiatives. According to him, it was through these efforts that "for the first time, the mountain extends over the pampas and reaches Buenos Aires, the capital. The city is taken by surprise at this revelation of industrious provincial skills, once forgotten and thought to be traditions of a bygone era" (Onelli n/d.b, 221).

Figure 8: The tapestry or rug on the left is probably from Onelli's factory (Archivo General de la Nación, dpto. docs fotográficos, n. inv. 145343).

Figure 9: Brochure of Onelli's rug factory with the same design (Archivo General de la Nación, box 2553).

The Liga Patriótica Argentina included a distinct segment dedicated to women's involvement. Within this framework, women engaged in various charitable activities, notably overseeing a school for working women. Of particular relevance to this article are the numerous exhibitions on weaving and embroidery that took place approximately between 1920 and 1934, collectively known as the Exposición Nacional de Tejidos y Bordados. Despite the Liga being a private organization, they secured a venue for these exhibitions under the National Fine Arts Commission. This collaboration underscored a particular interest from the State, evident not only in the involvement of the President of Argentina in these events but also emphasized by the use of the term "nacional" [national] in the exhibition's title. A telling photograph captures President Marcelo T. de Alvear alongside Berdier, the president of the Junta de Gobierno of women, and Carlés, the president of the Liga Patriótica Argentina. In the backdrop, an array of nativist rugs and weavings further highlights the significance of these cultural displays (see Fig. 10).

These exhibitions featured "demonstrations," where weavers skillfully wove *vicuña* wool. Additionally, students from the Liga Patriótica Argentina school engaged in weaving on smaller looms (*La Nación* 1923). A speech by Hortensia Berdier not only acknowledged the presence of the president at these events but also portrayed an idealized image of the weavers' work and their products, eliciting admiration from both Argentines and foreigners:

> This annual contest showcasing national fabrics, […] distinguished by the official endorsement marked by the attendance of the nation's chief executive, celebrates the simple artistry cultivated in the tranquil serenity of the Argentine mountains. These fabrics, ponchos, and blankets serve as a reflection of the very soul of their humble weavers, infusing each fiber with the mystical devotion to labor that constitutes the nation's great strength.

> These works, a source of pride for the venerable Argentine families and a source of wonder for foreigners who showcase them as a testament to the skill of a people steeped in tradition (*La Nación* 1927).

Figure 10: From left to right: Hortensia Berdier, Marcelo T. de Alvear, and Manuel Carlés at the opening ceremony of the 1927 textile exhibition (Archivo General de la Nación, dpto. docs fotográficos, n. inv. 79737).

Despite the weavers' diverse origins, not necessarily limited to the north or the mountains, there was a subtle reference to otherness and the arrival of products from distant lands. Even though these products hailed from the same country, they reclaimed an exotic and idealized quality that was simultaneously national and intertwined with identity and tradition. The visual records of these events also reveal a predominant presence of textiles featuring pre-Hispanic or nativist motifs. Strikingly absent are depictions of the modern or Persian styles, which were also available for sale in Onelli's factory and presumably produced by other weavers of the era.

Figure 11: Award-winning artworks at *Exposición Nacional de Tejidos y Bordados* in 1928 (Archivo General de la Nación, dpto. docs fotográficos, n. inv. 158453).

In the context of Onelli's company project, Carlés emphasized the necessity for capital investment in the production of primary goods, which could later be transformed into more advanced industries (Liga Patriótica Argentina 1919, 5). Simultaneously, the notion of "bringing" northern textiles to Buenos Aires was presented as an innovative and beneficial initiative for both weavers and the country at large (Liga Patriótica Argentina 1927, 4). Echoing this sentiment, the newspaper *La Nación* underscored how the Liga Patriótica Argentina maintained "the spirit of Argentine nationality latent," connecting different regions through mutual interests and shared ideals. This was intended to ensure that Buenos Aires served not only as the political capital but also as the epicenter from which the nation's culture and progress emanated (*La Nación* 1923).

Another noteworthy address by Berdier aligned with these perspectives. She asserted the need to assist women weavers in "finding means to facilitate their sales" (Liga Patriótica Argentina 1922, 1).[29] The exhibitions witnessed a growing number of participants each year. Berdier's choice of words indicated a specific focus on women, suggesting that they were the primary beneficiaries of these exhibitions: "Now, gentlemen, it is also necessary to assist these loom workers by providing them with the means to sustain this industry, while always preserving the traditional drawings. This is evident in the current exhibition, as almost all the fabrics retain the ancient Calchaquí designs." (Liga Patriótica Argentina 1922, 2).[30] However, a closer look at the awards provided reveals that initially, most winners were men. In the third exhibition, there were thirty-six male exhibitors and eight women, and in the fourth one, twenty-six exhibitors and nine women. The shift occurred at the eighth exhibition in 1927, with twenty-six exhibitors and approximately eighteen women receiving prizes.[31] This change could be linked to the common practice of men engaging in weaving in the northern regions of the country.

This prompts the question of how these artisans benefitted from such exhibitions, including the sales performance of their products. Furthermore, it poses a challenge to recover their voices and presence, which were arguably more

[29] At present, no records have been found regarding the weavers' sales methods in these exhibitions or in everyday life. However, it is plausible to assume that the shift from bartering to selling products for money was a significant improvement for the weavers' economy.

[30] It should be noted that, in the original Spanish quote that follows, all these references are for a female gender (*obreras*, *trabajadoras*, *teleras*): "Ahora bien, Señores; hay también que ayudar a estas trabajadoras del telar en el sentido de proporcionarles los medios para continuar esta industria, conservando siempre los dibujos primitivos. Esto ya se puede apreciar en esta Exposición, pues casi todas las telas conservan los dibujos antiguos calchaquis" (Liga Patriótica Argentina 1922, 2).

[31] This is an approximation based on the names of the exhibitors, excluding institutions or schools that presented in groups.

pronounced in these exhibitions than in Onelli's company. Even though the company showcased the results of the artisans' work, this second, albeit incomplete, project seemed to aim for a more ambitious outcome: to generate employment for artisans and to enhance industrial products, even if potentially less aligned with traditional weaving practices. Currently, the experiences of these weavers in such activities, be it in the industrial sector or through participation in exhibitions, remain unknown. Despite being organized by the National Fine Arts Commission, these exhibitions received little attention from the artistic community.

Conclusions

The exploration of textiles within the artistic industry reveals many problems and questions of hierarchy that are not as pronounced in a collective examination of the decorative arts. In addition to the role of the State, certain key actors and projects played a pivotal role in the advancement of textiles. The collaboration between Argentine managers and businessmen is intriguing, though the coordination of such activities by male figures and the upper classes is less surprising.

Conversely, within the artistic system, the decorative arts were already subject to a lower hierarchy. The creation of textiles by lower-class women, whether in urban or rural settings, placed them in a more anonymous realm compared to women associated with the Liga Patriótica Argentina or figures like Onelli, whose names appeared on the final products. Onelli, assuming a paternalistic role, occupied a central position from the outset, promoting these practices and enhancing the quality of life for women weavers. This initiative was later embraced by the women of the Liga Patriótica Argentina in their distinctive manner.

The involvement of these artisans, irrespective of their origins, demanded tremendous effort, yet the outcomes were not always apparent. Beyond the inherent challenges in their work, these textiles did not seem to attain significant competitiveness on an industrial scale. This is evidenced by Onelli's struggles in securing investors for his project, a challenge attributed to the inherent difficulty of producing high-quality textiles with a craftsmanship and durability dimension that had to be appealing but not necessarily inexpensive. In this context, the artistic industry, particularly one with a strong domestic or craft component, did not strictly adhere to the synchronized temporal demands that maximize productivity in terms of income.

However, the objective was not to manufacture mechanically woven fabrics. Instead, the aim was to propose a project that could bring together and integrate diverse actors and regions in the pursuit of a common good. This project, in addition

to contributing to the replacement of imported materials, sought to reinforce a national artistic identity.

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