Fabric with a (hi)story

Patterns, Colours, Symbols

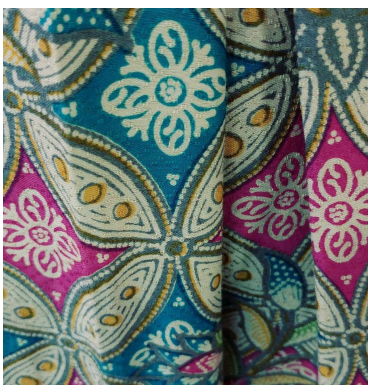
digital offer for creative learning

This fabric is somewhat special: waxprint! Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Nairobi, Addis Abeba, Dakar, Bamako, Lagos or Accra – Waxprints can be found anywhere in the mega cities on the African continent. Fabric rolls measuring 1 m in width and often carrying over 350 k colourful designs are processed into dresses, shirts, shoes, bags, umbrellas or furniture covers. Imagination has no limit here.

Originally, however, these fabrics have been made in Asia. On Java, an Indonesian island, wearing handcrafted batik cloths meant strong identity and power. During the colonial period in the 19th century African workers of the Dutch East India Company brought some batik cloths to West African colonies. Active trading of these beautifully and colourfully presented fabrics developed quite quickly. A few years later, around 1880, production of cotton fabrics moved to the Netherlands, from where new patterns were exported as a cheap alternative to the handcrafted batiks from Indonesia. Today, waxprints are equally produced on the African continent and in the Netherlands.

The name “waxprint” refers to its production. It’s a mechanical manufacturing process designing cotton fabrics in a particular way. As in batik art, wax gauges are used to print patterns on ready-weaved fabrics that are then coloured. The wax layer is finally removed through heat, in a process that’s repeated several times. Like this, fabrics and other material can be printed nearly flawlessly.

Did you know waxprints can tell different stories? Every patterns has an own title and an explanation. Further down you will find a nice little exercise to make your own story appear in the pattern. Also you will find some crayon templates.



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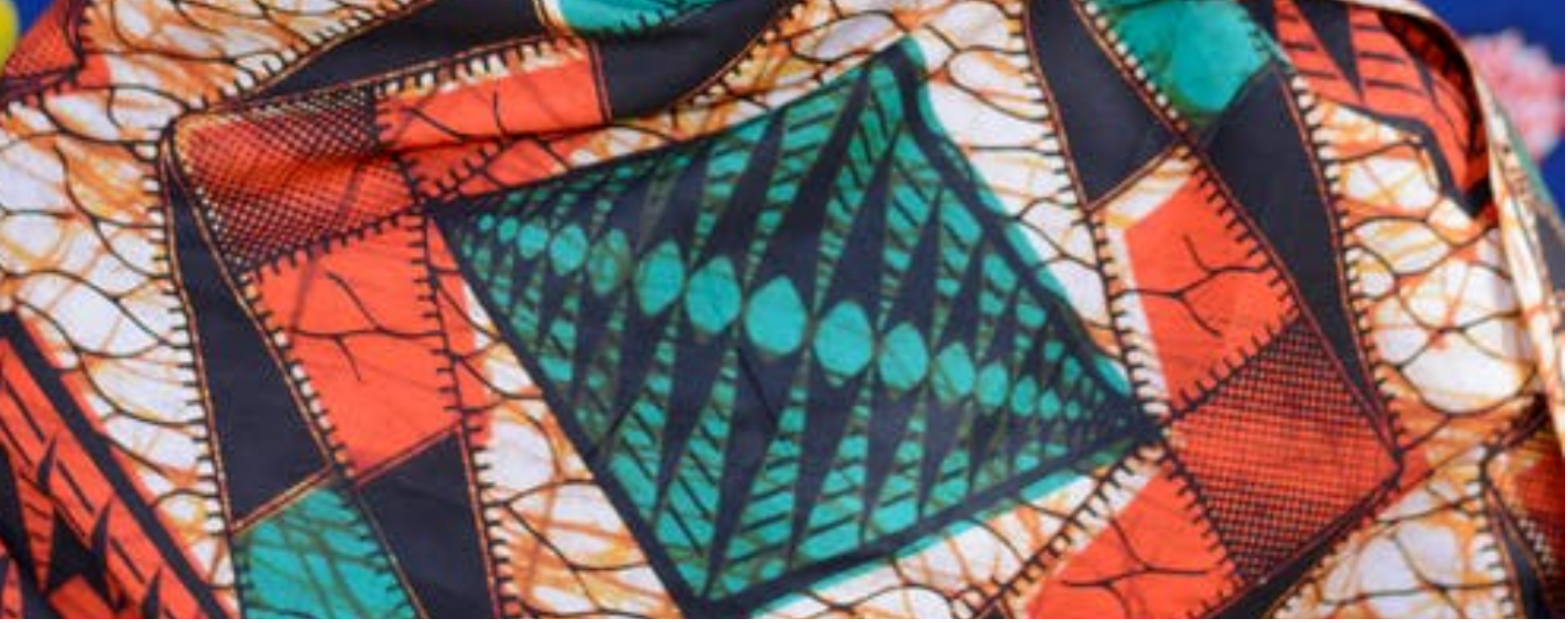

Sample design and Waxprint

weaving stories into the pattern

Samples are diverse and can tell exciting stories. What is a sample though? And how do they come into being? Repeatedly occurring images and pictures that are symmetrical in a way or another make a sample. The word originates from the Greek word for “regularity” or “harmony”. So when a figure, a pattern or a geometrical form appears several times in the exact same, “regular” way in a picture, on an object or in nature, we are talking about a sample. Some of the rather famous samples are e.g. a zebra’s stripes, onion pattern/Saxon designs on ceramics or sometimes even clouds in the sky.

In waxprints samples are inspired by many things. There are fabrics with cell phones, with flowers, with different shapes, every day objects, people’s faces, animals or symbols. There is barely a sample that’s not been printed on a waxprint. In our crayon templates you can find some of them.

Sample design

Think about a sample that can tell something about you. What’s particularly important to you? Is there something that describes you? Are you happy? Then a sun could be a good symbol. Do you like skateboarding? Then draw a halfpipe or a skateboard. You may use your favourite colours. Take a white sheet of paper and some coloured pencils and get started!

Fold the sheet in the middle along the long side and then once again in the middle. Begin to draw your sample on one side of the sheet. Once finished, turn the sheet around and draw the exact same picture on the other side. Unfold the paper and fold it again the opposite way so that you end up with two white sides. Draw your sample on both sides again. Unfold the whole paper when you’ve finished. There you go, here you have your own sample. Think about a headline and imagine a nice little story about it.

Waxprint

Would you like to design your own fabric? All you need is a fabric, a paint brush, a tea candle, fabric dye (for cold dyeing), blotting paper, a flat iron and a wipeable underlay. Think about what you want to draw on the fabric and use a pencil to draw the shapes on the fabric. Try not to press to hard since the lines will be visible in the end. Light the tea candle so that the wax will start melting. Take the paint brush, dip it into the melted wax and quickly redraw the shapes you made with the pencil. Let everything dry out properly until the wax is hard and firm again.

Now we start dyeing. Prepare the dye in the exact way as indicated on the package. Carefully dye the waxed fabric and hang it up to dry. Make sure the wax pattern does not break. Once the fabric has dried, you only need to remove the wax. That works best with a trick: Take the fabric and lay it on a wipeable underlay with the waxed side on top. Now place the blotting paper on top so that the entire wax shapes are covered. Iron the blotting paper – you will see the wax melting and being absorbed by the paper. In this way you can easily remove all the wax from the fabric. There you go, you made your own waxprint!

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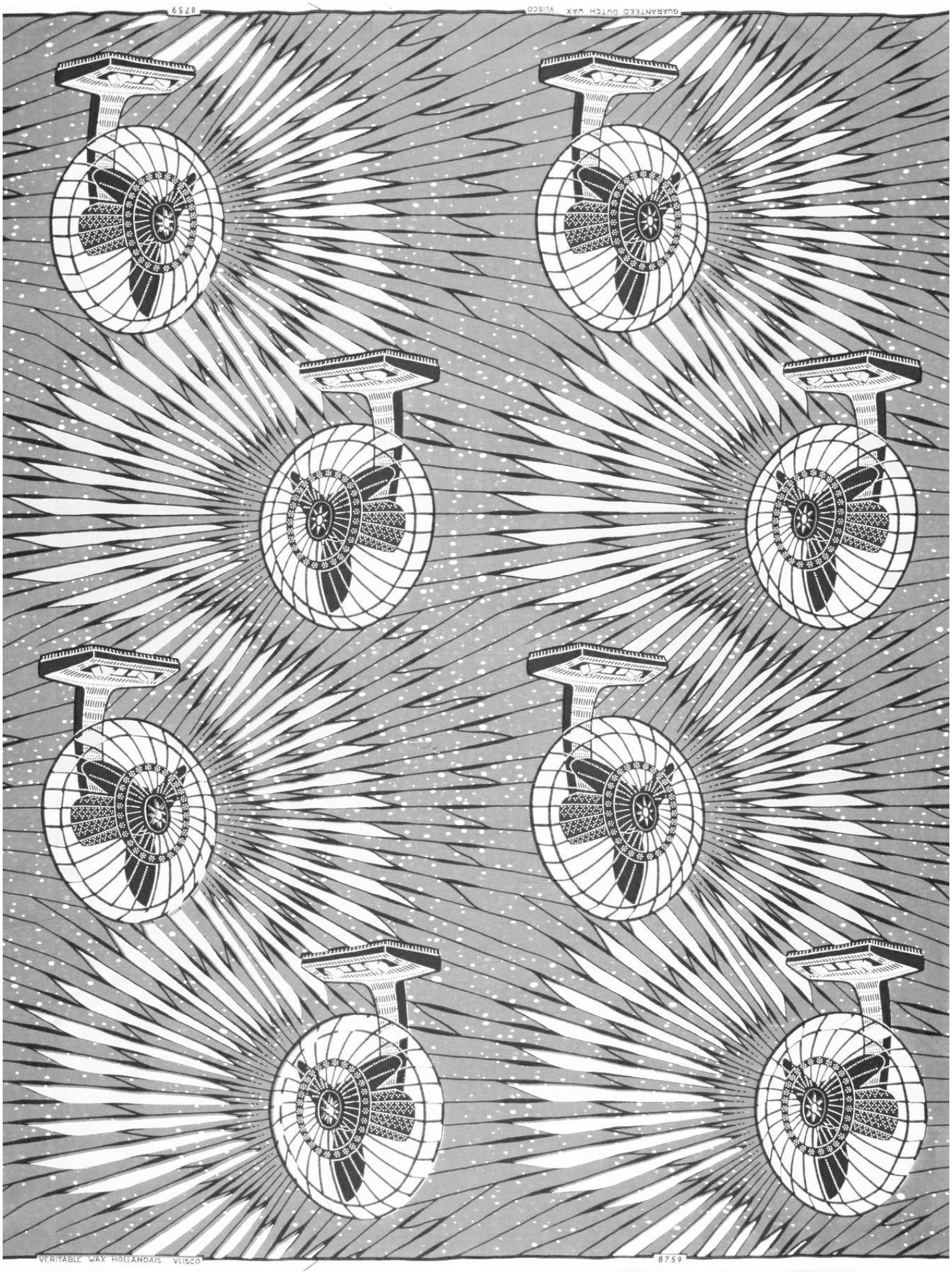
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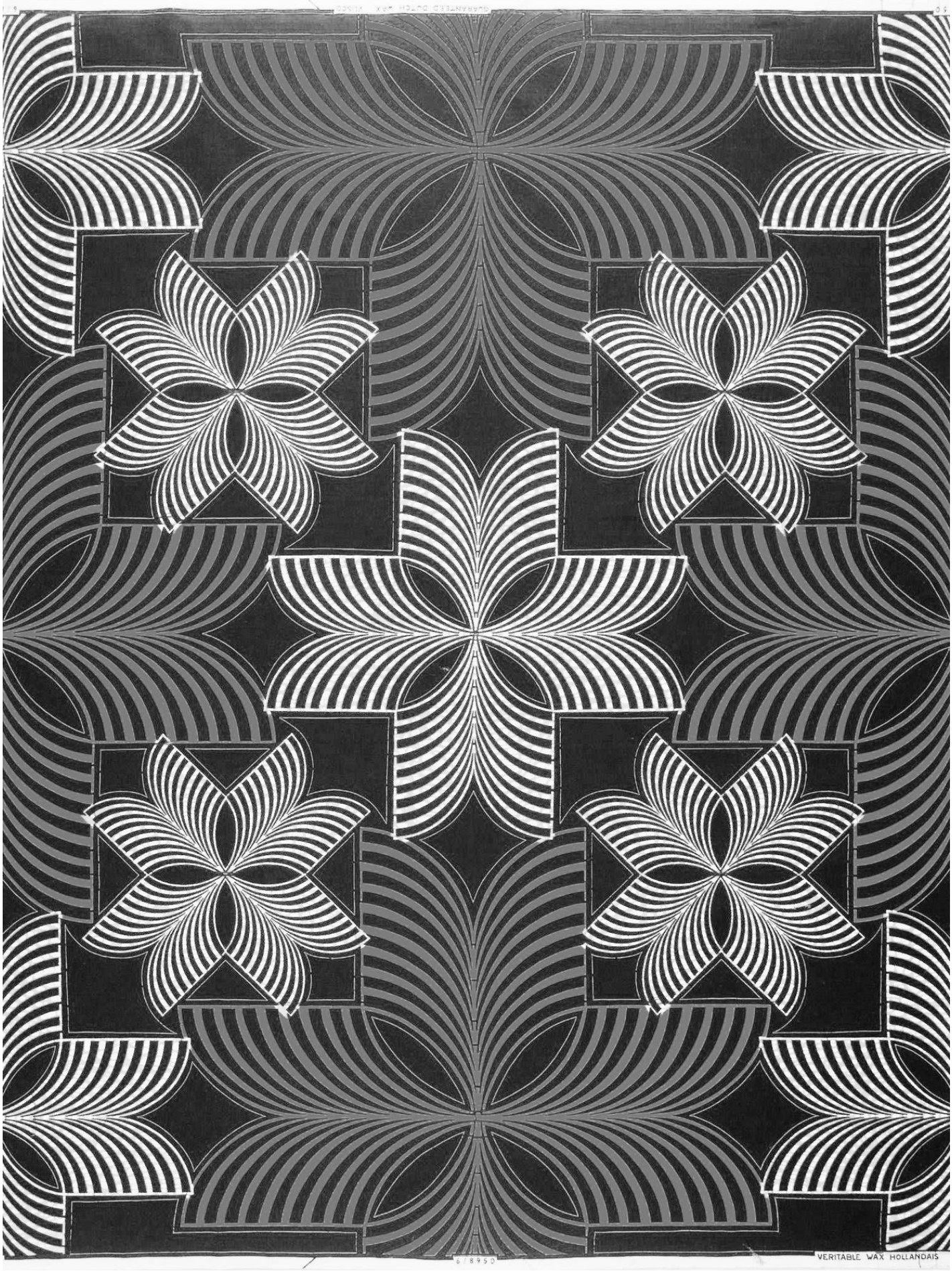
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