‘Facing the objects: Methods for object-based textile research’,
25 October 2018, Nordiska Museet, Stockholm

* Indicates a slide in accompanying presentation

Travels in the archive: From conventions of production to cultural meaning

**My approach to object-based study grew out of my work in textile conservation and museums, especially in the search for better understanding of unprovenanced and undated objects. In this work, I have striven to move beyond technical analysis and historical texts to get to the realm of cultural meanings. This talk will describe my methods through a structured series of examples.*

*Caroline Halsted’s book, *Investigation; or, Travels in the Boudoir*, typical of women’s writing of its time, takes the form of a conversation, here between a young girl named Agnes, and her mother. Mamma claims that in order to grasp the basic knowledge about the origin and manufacture of the ordinary household objects contained within just one room of the house, a journey of at least one month would be required.

> *Agnes:* A month to get round your room! I cannot understand you, dear mamma. Why to penetrate into every corner— to tread over every inch of it, would be at most but a ten minutes’ occupation. [...] Ah! dearest mamma, I cannot help laughing when I look at the tables and chairs, the carpets and such things, and think you imagine that I cannot understand them...
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> *Mamma:* Well […] it does not appear to me that my assertion would prove very wide of the truth; for although… I know of course that you can tell me you are standing on a carpet, yet I very much doubt if you could describe the process used in making it; or say whether it is Turkey, Brussels, English, or Scotch.
>
> *Agnes:* Dear me, no! that I certainly could not. A carpet has always seemed to me but a carpet...

So, the book proceeds over the course of 296 pages and a month’s worth of conversations, Agnes emphatically learns what a carpet can be, as indeed she becomes thoroughly drilled in the techniques of investigatory research. *As Mamma wisely indicates, “We are too apt, dear Agnes, to consider as unimportant those things that are abundant and in daily use; and

to deem it a waste of time to bestow thought or attention [on them]... But to a reflective mind, it is not so. The most trivial matters will often engender [the most…] beneficial considerations..."[1]

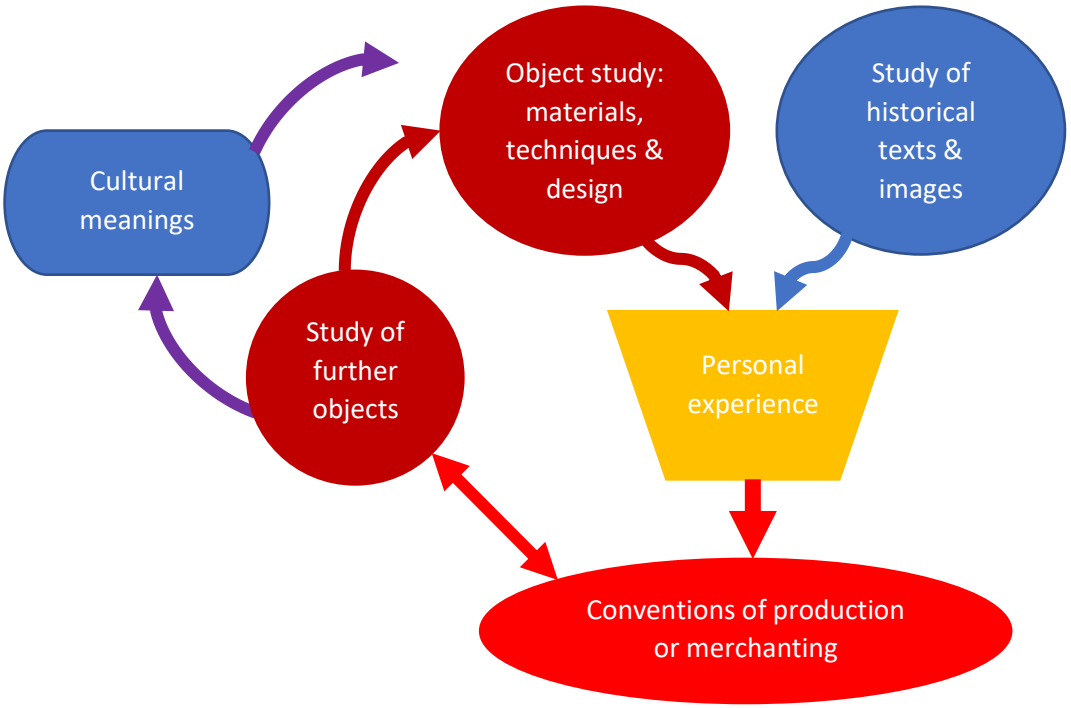
*So, with this advice in mind, let me begin with the example of a girl's printed dress of the 1820s. The dot pattern of this dress is so underwhelming that it nearly escapes attention; a dot is "but a dot," right? *Let's take a closer look at these dots. When they are compared to the usual diamond grid of dots (seen here on a later child's dress), it's easy to see that the dots of the first dress are arranged differently.

In fact the dress is based on the seven-dot arrangement. This seven-dot structure has a central dot surrounded by six dots in the points of a hexagon. But this is not a simple hexagonal grid. Here the structure develops to form a series of overlapping dodecahedrons.* This is a more pleasing arrangement of dots than the typical diamond grid, but just as effective in distributing the dots evenly. *This structure was to become a standard device for French engravers during the nineteenth century, and was codified by Berthoud in his 1906 treatise. Unfortunately, we don't know its status in the 1820s when the dress was made. Could the seven-dot structure be diagnostic of French origins? Too soon to say, but this might be precisely the sort of meaning that this dot pattern communicated in its time. For me, after this dress, "trivial matters" could never be overlooked again.

So, what is my method here? When I examine printed garments, I am not just trying to understand aspects of their production: their materials, technology, and design. But I am searching for information that links to broader cultural meanings. And looking for meanings that can then also inform the study of further objects. *I've tried to make a simple diagram although I must admit it was a bit beyond my abilities within the Microsoft graphics environment. What I want to show is that the process begins with the object study, but it is only when this is combined with historical information and sifted through the filter of personal experience that we grasp aspects that tell us about conventions of production or merchanting practice. Such conventions of practice, say the use of a particular dot structure and its association with a place of origin, are hypothetical until tested by further object

[1] Halsted (afterward Atthill), Caroline Amelia (1837) *Investigation; or, travels in the boudoir*. London, Smith, lder and Co., pp.35-36.

study. It is then that we can move toward understanding these conventions as repositories able to accumulate cultural meaning.



*Another example. This is a pair of men's trousers made from a woven checked cloth that was *printed* with a side band imitating a woven border. Such borders were fashionable for men's trouserings in the middle of the nineteenth century, but their date of introduction is uncertain. *We come across this look in printed drills, used for summer wear in Europe or exported to South America. The print here simulates both the ground weave and the borders. The Swaisland print works in Crayford produced hundreds of such designs, but the designers were always careful to match the side border to the ground weave: pairing twill with twill, check with check, and stripe with stripe. *Our trousers, however, appear to be printed by a small jobbing printer lacking in weaving knowledge. Here the imitated twill clashes with the check weave of the ground, even if the colouring is subtle enough to disguise this.

*Check trousers originated with the black-and-white shepherd's check popularised by Lord Brougham [Bro-am]. And in the early 1830s, when the fashion caught on with Oxford and Cambridge students, brown-and-drab colourings were introduced.[2] It is said that it was in 1843 or '44 that borders were added to the checked trouserings. *The London retailer,

[2] Locke, James (1860), p.37

James Locke of Regent Street, laid claim to this innovation, and related the story that "the trade was taken by surprise and his rivals had to send out [existing woven] stocks to get a border printed." If this story is true, our trousers might represent more than simply a somewhat clumsy job; they could be amongst those printed in the 1840s rush to be *on-trend*. The evidence is not yet sufficient. Since the tailoring is not high-end, these trousers are that rare thing, middle-class menswear, usually worn until worn out, so there are few comparable examples. *Hopefully a search of daguerreotypes will be able to reveal further information, (although it can be difficult to get men to show off the sides of their legs when posing for the camera).

These two examples have looked at *simple* pattern elements in dress. *In more complex designs, pattern evidence becomes problematised because patterns were frequently recycled. Here we see a distinctive overlapping leaf pattern in two copperplate inventory books. These allow us to track the origin of the engraved plate to William Edward Gilling, and then its later acquisition by Moore, Johnston and Mason after Gilling's closed in 1817. *After that firm closed in 1831, we see that the plate was purchased by Charles Swaisland. *And Swaisland was to revive and register the pattern in 1843, so that the life of the pattern actually extended across three decades. *An even more extreme case of design recycling is found on an example first printed in 1828 on striped muslin, seen here on the left. This was revived in 1912 as a print for the African export market. *And this pattern was still selling well enough in 1935 that it was transferred to a wider roller to increase potential sales. Only in 1937, more than a century after it was first created, was the pattern taken out of production. These examples illustrate why an understanding of conventions of practice gained through object study is required in order to make sense of design evidence. *Now let's examine how that such evidence can operate. Here, the painted design that we see is stamped with the word "Engaged," meaning that the design is exclusively licensed for use by one particular customer. We can also notice the each of the grounding styles of the pattern has a rectangular notch cut from it. These notches represent "match pieces" retained by the engraver or block cutter for their own records.

*In this example from the firm Turnbull & Stockdale, both the design and the corresponding engraving book can be compared side-by-side to show how this works. What these notched designs tell us is that production has proceeded to the stage of having the printing matrix

made. Since this stage entails a large financial commitment, it means that the pattern is highly likely to have been printed and offered on the market. So a notched design is not a damaged art-work, but a precious record of production-readiness. *This convention was established by the early nineteenth century, so here we see an engaged design of the 1830s notched in the same way. Its meaning, within the manufacturing context, was that the design had proceeded to engraving, and that the appropriate Engraving Book could be consulted to find further information. This "convention of production" allows us to read this pattern book as an "engaged" book, rather than just an album of designs.

So far, we have looked at fairly simple analyses that have not required long-term study or the use of hundreds of examples. *One of the questions I have been researching is how to tell the difference between an Indian cotton and its European counterpart. This is of especial interest from the time in the late 1780s when mechanised spinning of fine yarns with the spinning mule first began to bring European muslins into close competition with Indian ones. In my studies, I have measured selvage widths, done thread counts, described the character of warp and weft yarns, and photographed them under the microscope. There have been many instances of uncertain readings, but occasionally one stumbles across a clearly readable example that serves to point a direction for theorisation about conventions of practice.

*Firstly, the hand-spun Indian cottons usually exhibit a variety of yarn thickness that can give rise to a somewhat thready appearance. Here, I placed an Indian printed cotton on a light box to reveal this thready character. This is not only due to hand-spinning, but to the practice of the Indian weaver of combining yarns of three or four degrees of quality, as was observed by James Cooke Taylor in 1851.[3] *Under the microscope, we can see just how extreme the differences in yarn thickness can be in the Indian product. Mule spinning gave the British muslins a more uniform character. *Here we see an example from the end of the eighteenth century that manifests the British product when it had attained a standard of quality equal to its Indian prototypes. *Under magnification, its uniformity is quite pronounced. *And when compared side-by-side with the Indian example, it can be seen that this uniformity is carried through into the selvage structure. But these examples show *ideal*

[3] Taylor, James Cooke (1851) *A descriptive and historical account of the cotton manufactures of Dacca in Bengal, by a former resident of Dacca*. London: John Mortimer, 42.

cases, made convincing because they also confirm our expectations. Other dresses can present a more confused picture. We must remember, part of the problem here is that we are dealing with a moving target. Practice is not static; while conventions of hand-craft generally change slowly, the conventions of mechanised industries can adapt at a fast pace. Already in 1808, a weaver from Bolton felt that the quality of British yarns had deteriorated during the past decade- because improved machinery meant that *fine yarns* could now be spun from *poorer quality* cotton.[4]

*One of the highlights of exploring different museum collections is finding examples that challenge one's comfortable assumptions built through viewing customary material of similar provenance. Researching at the Royal Ontario Museum under a Veronika Gervers Fellowship, I turned up several dresses with a print registration mark that I had not seen before. By registration mark, I mean the dots that the printer superimposes to align the different colours when printing. Although the sleeves of this dress are in a style dating from the late 1830s, its printed cotton dates from some years earlier. *Its distinctive chiné-look stripe can be found in designs of around 1830 from the Swaisland workshop in Crayford. This was a time when three-colour roller printing was still new. Two-colour roller printing was still the norm (and nearly always madder red and black). To extend the colour palette, such prints would often be augmented by hand-block printing. *Here, the engraver cleverly got red and pink from the same roller by introducing a mottled texture. Then the black, red and pink print was overprinted in buff, blue and yellow. What I want to draw attention to is that the registration mark for the red and black occurs close to one selvage, just once in the circumference of the roller. It repeats at only 28.5cm (or just over 11 inches), which is narrower than the usual *engraved* roller size. *Two dresses with matching registration marks and the same unusual roller size were also found at the Royal Ontario Museum, dating from the same time, around 1830. The bleed-printed chevron helped to provide a key for understanding the group. Its technique is described by Edward Parnell in his *Life and Labours of John Mercer.*[5] Two or three *wooden* rollers, carved out to leave the areas intended to print raised, supplied the different colours; each was placed so that its impression overlapped that of the preceding roller. "The colours applied in this way were

[4] Stanley, Thomas (1808) *Report from the Committee on petitions of several cotton manufacturers and journeymen cotton weavers, &c.* Paper 177. London: HMSO, 23.
[5] Parnell (1886)

not thickened as for ordinary printing; so that the edges became shaded off by absorption, and effects [were] obtained similar to what is called 'rainbow printing.'" *The described technique, dependent upon *surface* (not engraved) printing rollers, makes us look again at the first dress, and we begin to see that the quality of impression is not the even impression of engraved roller printing, but the stamped look of surface printing. *Looking then at modern surface rollers, we also find there the convention of placing a single registration pin at one selvage edge. So here, we see how objects can be used to inform each other. Understanding this fabric as a surface roller print and its English connection through John Mercer, suggests that such experiments may have arisen from competing with the newly introduced French *perrotine*, the automated block printing machine of 1832.

*I now want to move from textile production to the use of textiles in garments. One matter that has occupied my attention for some time is that of printed flounces. Flounced dresses were in fashion from 1851 to 1860, and a particular speciality developed in printed muslin flounces that were sold alongside matching fillings repeating just the small ground figure. The best quality were hand-block printed but roller printed versions were also available. *Here you can see on the left one such two-colour roller print on checked muslin of good (but not the best) quality, while on the right is displayed a two-colour block print on fine muslin.

The cleverness of dresses made from these fabrics was that equal lengths of flounce print and filling print were purchased, and it was up to the dressmaker's imagination to determine how these were distributed in the garment. *It is interesting to note here that the roller printed dress uses 5½ yards of each fabric, while the block printed dress uses 6½ yards of each pattern, so the richer quality dress also displays the greater indulgence in material. In fact, only 6 yards of the *filling* print were found in the dress itself, and I suspect that the extra half-yard of filling was used as a bonnet trimming, adding further *panache* to the ensemble. *However, the dressmaker who worked with the roller-print was prompted to be more creative. She trimmed off the top border from the flounce and used this band to decorate the bodice, thus maximising the effect from a minimum amount of material. Here we see two dressmaking strategies where the challenge of *working with less* stimulated the more imaginative solution.

*The last example I will present involves the pattern books of Charles Hilton & Son, a nineteenth-century silk manufacturing firm that was located in Lancashire in the north of England. Typical of Lancashire silk manufacturers, the bulk of Hilton's business was in plain silks, and in striped and checked patterns. Such silks were probably a core offering of the British home market, and would have found use in the day dresses of middle-class women. Compared to their more visually striking cousins, the expensive figured silks, checked and striped silks generally have been neglected by the historian, partly because they are seen as without style, almost dateless.

In the Hilton & Son archive, the category 'checks and stripes' is represented by thirty pattern books covering the period from 1847 to 1875, practically year by year, and often season by season. In the close study of the patterns required to return the books to their archival order, it became apparent that striped patterns were always aligned, in both weave and colouration, with checks of the same date, and that, together, checks and stripes followed their own stylistic sequence in tune with dress fashions. The Hilton pattern books not only document this sequence in detail, but if the fashions they describe are as widely followed as those of more elaborate figured silks, they could be used to date checked and striped patterns found on surviving silk dresses.

*There isn't time to run through the whole sequence here, but a few highlights from one decade will suffice to illustrate the type of features observable. By spring 1849, a form of extra-warp patterning known as 'stitch' patterns came into use. Stitch patterns were often seen in the early 1850s, accompanied by alternating horizontal bars in the ground. From 1853 to 1855, finely barred grounds usually alternated four wefts of one shade with four wefts of another. The year 1857 saw an increased emphasis on the horizontal in keeping with the expanding crinoline, and check fashions pursued broad, banded effects. Even when square checks were re-introduced in 1858, they were finely barred in order to increase the directional effect of the tones. I hope this abridged selection of salient features shows the visual distinctiveness of checked patterns, and how stylistic changes can indeed be followed.

*So far, the Hilton pattern sequence seems to compare favourably with photographic evidence. A portrait of around 1854 shows a silk in keeping with the fine four-and-four barred grounds of the mid-1850s. *An Aberdeen photograph of around 1857 shows the

broad raised bands of the late 1850s, *and an ambrotype of around 1858 from the collection of Platt Hall shows the return of square checks. These few examples are only suggestive, and obviously more work is needed to fully test and refine the style sequence. The fact that checked silks were worn for photographs indicates that they held some status, albeit beneath that of figured silks. *But what are we to make of a royal couple wearing checked silks? The clue here is in the date. It cannot have been by chance that Victoria and Albert had themselves photographed in Lancashire silks just after the Anglo-French trade agreement of 1860 began to have disastrous effects on the British silk industry. Dressing down in Lancashire silks allowed the couple to express solidarity with the home industry in silks that could not in any way be mistaken for French.

Conclusions

John Ruskin claimed that "Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts- the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others; but of the three, the only quite trustworthy one is the last […]"[6] We might similarly align the three major forms of evidence: experiential, verbal and object-based. We need to read all three, but I would assert for object-based evidence the greater trustworthiness. However, as long as object-based evidence remains merely self-referential, it will not be valued by the wider range of historians. It is when object-based knowledge becomes transferrable that it begins to reveal its power. If the object-based researcher can begin to read the conventions of practice that have led to a particular structure and appearance of an object, this understanding can be applied to other objects. And through multiple examples, we can begin to read how these conventions provide sites wherein cultural meaning can reside.

[6] Ruskin, John (1877) *St. Mark's Rest: The history of Venice*. New York: John Wiley & Sons. "… the policy of a nation may be compelled, and, therefore, not indicative of its true character. Its words may be false, while yet the race remains unconscious of their falsehood; and no historian can assuredly detect the hypocrisy. But art is always instinctive; and the honesty or pretence of it are therefore open to the day."