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Pasold Research Fund Conference 2018: Fifty Years of 'Textile History': Cloth, Dress, Fashion

16 November 2019, Museum of London

*It is striking that from its very first volume, *Textile History* contained an article about design. Thomas Stillie traced the evolution of pattern in nineteenth-century Scottish tweeds. His approach, organising a range of types into a style sequence, was conventional for its time, but the practical details, the descriptions of handle, and the sheer audacity to cover the usually overlooked design of checks, revealed the willingness of the new journal to present alternative design histories. Even with this auspicious start, I think it is fair to say that the journal had no particular remit for the subject of *textile design*. Instead, over the years, it has welcomed an eclectic and experimental mixture of contributions. Reviewing these, I have uncovered several research opportunities that I wish to highlight today.

The designer and design practice

*Here, I want to assert that the term *designer* implies an activity called *design* separate from the activity of making, with designs being a product in their own right. This is readily understood when there is a painted design on paper that precedes creation of a textile. But referring back to the Scottish tweeds, design can also be done in the loom, by the creation of samples. In this case, the weaver is a designer during those times when sampling is done, but there is still a distinction between design and execution, even if they are more closely entangled. The difficulties arise when we enter the more blurry region of the differences between design *origination*, the *adaptation* of the designs of others, and the *translation* of designs for production readiness. I would argue that all of these can be called design, and

that we should be more cautious about seeing the designer only as an individual, often heroicised, creator.

*Maira Thunder gave a new perspective on the designer when she recounted the interactions between professional pattern drawers and amateur embroiderers, and the role of retailers in linking the two.¹ I feel that it is these networks of actors, each of whom has a role in the design outcomes, that is in need of elucidation in order to move the field forward.

*Even professional designers rely upon other designers, and I'll note here the work of Bernat Klein presented in the journal in 2010,² and throw open what relationship Klein's work had to suppliers of fancy yarns, like Greg and Co., and in turn to yarn designers like Margaret Leischner, who worked for Greg's.

Imitation and innovation

*This is one debate frequently touched upon in *Textile History* over the years. It has come into play in narratives of technology transfer, vernacular traditions, import substitution, and design copyright. Forms of imitation and copying are also bound up with design practice: after all, fashion, by definition, requires imitation, and design has from time immemorial recycled past designs. Manufacturers once saw copyright as a way to gain *temporary* advantage in bringing a design to market, not a long-term claim to artistic originality as we think of it today. These conceptions of originality are at odds with design practice. Some years ago, Maxine Berg observed that in the context of new commodities in the eighteenth-

¹ "Object Lessons: Designs and clients for embroidered dress", 1782-94", **37** (1), 2006. "Capturing understanding of women's embroidery designs: A methodology for research and a critique of cataloguing databases using the example of women's embroidery in nineteenth-century Britain", **45** (1), 2014.

² Helen Taylor, "Bernat Klein: An eye for colour", **41** (1), 2010.

century, it was imitation of foreign luxuries that generated innovation, and consequently “imitation was considered... part of the inventive process.”³ But within design history, modern-day cultural anxieties about copying seem to stand in the way of a better understanding of imitation as a driver of design innovation across all historical periods.

Luxury and everyday

*It was in luxury goods that design first flourished, and until recent years, historians have given most attention to luxury textiles, admittedly in part due to their higher survival rate, but also because their aesthetic values suit traditional art historical approaches. This imbalance was noted by Stanley Chapman who remarked back in 1981 that “most writers on textile printing have failed to notice the importance of the popular market...”⁴ When we bring the everyday market into the picture, as David Greysmith found, “the conventional view of the designs of the period is scarcely recognizable...”⁵

*Now that ‘trickle-down’ theories of fashion transmission are generally dismissed, a new challenge is to uncover the interactions of design between these higher and lower market spheres. We can likewise observe design influences moving between the spheres of garment and furnishing fabrics, and between home trade and export markets. A fertile new territory for research could be centred around these linkages between different design spheres.

Simplicity and complexity

³ “From Imitation to Invention: Creating commodities in eighteenth-century Britain” *Economic History Review*, 55 (1), Feb. 2002, pp.1-30.

⁴ Stanley Chapman and Serge Chassagne (1981) *European Textile Printers in the Eighteenth Century: A study of Peel and Oberkampf*. Exeter NH: Heinemann Educational Books, p.204.

⁵ David Greysmith (1983) “Patterns, piracy and protection in the textile printing industry 1787-1850” *Textile History*, 14 (2), 165-94 [183].

*Fashion often oscillates between a taste for simplicity and a mania for complexity. David Brett wrote eloquently about the social forces contributing to the development of the 'plain style' during the Protestant Reformation.⁶ But the historianship of complexity still awaits its champion. Peter Thornton saw 'density', from openness to close-packing, as a crucial distinguishing feature of designs of different time periods. This spatial concept of analysis was something that Susan Miller took on board in her comparison of *bizarre* silk designs with their possible Japanese source material, referring to the "interplay between positive and negative space and among vertical, horizontal, and angled planes."⁷ Conceiving textile design as systems of more or less complexity could forge new ways of thinking about how design develops. And this type of investigation aligns with the contemporary thinking on granularity— the coarse-grained or fine-grained description of topologies— and with digital methods of analysis.

Geographies of design

*Until recently, histories of design have been dominated by approaches that have stressed national distinctions rather than interconnected geographies. European design can better be viewed as operating in a network of regional hubs with symbiotic relationships. This approach was taken by Peter Thornton in 1998, presenting Florence, Venice, Antwerp, Augsburg and other cities as design hubs operating in conjunction during specified time periods.⁸ The shifting importance of the various hubs, their alliances and re-alliances, and their itinerant design workforce warrant examination in greater depth.

⁶ David Brett (2004 [1999]) *The Plain Style: Protestant theology in the history of design*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press.

⁷ Miller, S., "Europe Looks East: Ceramics and silk, 1680-1710" In: A. Jolly (ed.)(2007) *A Taste for the Exotic: Foreign influences on early eighteenth-century silk designs*. Riggisberg: Abegg Stiftung, pp. 155-73.

⁸ Thornton included a map showing the principal trade routes that spread Italian design: *Form & Decoration: Innovation in the decorative arts 1470-1870*. (1998) London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

*To reinforce the futility of nationalist design standpoints, in 1857, a typical Paris design atelier was described as “principally Alsatian... Switzerland also supplies its quota to these ateliers... Besides these, there are a few Frenchmen from different provinces, a sprinkling of Germans, Dutch, Flemings, seldom more than one or two Parisians, and perhaps a solitary Englishman.”⁹

*Finally, textiles designed in Europe for trade with distant markets, and the workings of design intelligence that made this possible, is a growing field of interest, stimulated in part by the wider accessibility of design archives. Sally Tuckett and Stana Nenadic’s study of the United Turkey Red archive illustrates the situation encountered by Scottish designers working within non-European conventions.¹⁰ And I would add here that while the merchant’s goal may have been imperialistic, seeking to undercut indigenous production, the designer always remained in a position of service toward the taste of the foreign consumer. Perhaps that is a nice positive note on which to end. I realise that I have not so much described new *directions* for design research, as an emerging new *emphasis* on design networks, transfer between different design spheres, and geographical interconnectivity.

Thank you.

⁹ “Designers’ Ateliers in Paris” in: *Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, Vol.7, No.176, 16 May 1857, p. 306.

¹⁰ S. Tuckett & S. Nenadic (2012) “Colouring the Nation: A new in-depth study of the turkey red pattern books in the National Museums Scotland” *Textile History*, 43 (2), 161-82