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Design: Reflections and directions in textile history

It is an irony that the study of textile design history is impeded by the very ubiquity of design, and consequently its tendency to be held as tacit, and overlooked. In fifty years of *Textile History*, the topic of *design* has been more likely to appear incidentally in the body of an article than as its subject. For example, Fiona Kerlogue (TH 28-2: 151) mentions in passing the influence of traded Indian *patolas* on the patterns of Sumatran ikat textiles within an article devoted to the East India Company trade at Jambi. And while the importance of design to success in textile manufacture is commonly acknowledged, its nature is rarely elucidated. Vanessa Habib (TH 28-2: 164), quoting the *Edinburgh Advertiser* of 24 April 1764, cites the intention of William Cheape to improve Edinburgh's Scotch carpet manufacture with "all due attention to the improvement of the patterns" but what might have constituted such improvement is a difficult matter to extricate.

Foundational studies in textile design history

Foundational studies to guide textile historians through the changing contexts and meanings of design are relatively few. Peter Thornton's survey of Western design history from the Renaissance through the Victorian era is one of the most accessible.[1] He treats design in terms of the development and successions of styles emanating from various centres, and the transfer of ideas from designer to designer. James Trilling takes on the full global

heritage of ornamental design viewed through ten pairs of dialectical concepts.[2] Three of these describe historical forces in the evolution of ornament: convention versus innovation, maker's versus patron's imagination, and local tradition versus outside influence.[3] David Brett set out to reconnect the ornamental and the decorative back to their human roots in pleasure and sociality; his works are grounded in an analysis of theoretical approaches from Kant to Gombrich, while bringing in the perceptual psychology of J.J. Gibson and the psychoanalytic theory of D.W. Winnicott.[4]

The design literature of the eighteenth century, when divisions between manufacture-led and art-led design first began to crystallise, was investigated by Anne Puetz.[5] The unregulated nature of design training allowed a fluidity of working practices not easily codified. From the 1740s onward, she found a burgeoning range of publications that conflated models and instruction for "artistic, artisanal and amateur audiences" (223).

Further foundational studies are warranted. In particular, an approach emphasising the tactile aspect of textile design is wanting. For the nineteenth century, a problem has been the tendency toward nationalistic histories focused on competitive industrial power, and ignoring the wide circulation of designs and designers across Europe. For the twentieth century, the modernist project and its emphasis on originality has led historians to focus largely on innovators, leaving aside the wider field of design for everyday production. There is wide scope for corrective investigations.

The practice of design

From its first volume, *Textile History* engaged with the history of design. The practitioner Thomas A. Stillie (TH 1) traced the evolution of pattern in the nineteenth century Scottish tweed industry. His approach, elucidating a style sequence, is conventional, but technical details, descriptions of handle, and the audacity to cover the oft-overlooked design of checks, reveal the willingness of the new journal to present alternative design histories. Fiona Anderson (TH 37-2) reiterated the important investment in design innovation in the tweed industry, where large numbers of trial patterns were produced for selection by merchants, necessitating frequent re-warping and loom down-time. Martin Norgate (TH 4) presented another practice-led approach: a brief sketch of the work of Alexander Robertson, a free-lance damask designer active in Dunfermline in the first half of the twentieth century. Norgate, a former curator, assembled his information through oral history, written enquiry and documents in order to contextualise items in the Dunfermline Museum collection, and provide a glimpse of studio life during a period of industrial change.

The study of design practice has been restricted by the relatively small size of design firms and the poor rate of survival of archival records. It can be difficult to penetrate beyond a list of names collated from trade directories or census returns. Evidence for in-house design teams held in company archives is more plentiful, but this group of designers was frequently anonymised and procedures were seldom written down.[6] How designers transitioned from serving craft-based workshops to working for sites of mass-production is little understood. And the contribution of design to business success is difficult to analyse.

The term *designer* implies that the activity of design can be separated from that of making, and that designs are a product in their own right. But within individual biographies, design and execution are often entangled. Differences between design origination, adaptation and

translation for production are often blurred. Wardle (TH 32-2) investigated the royal embroiderer John Shepley (1575-1631) who organised large workrooms to carry out costly commissions in silver and gold embroidery. Detailed bills refer to patterns and samples carried out preliminary to such work, one including paper and ink, suggesting that Shepley's work involved, if not designing, the translation of designs to working models. Jennie Brunton (TH 32-2) described the career of Annie Garnett whose Windermere Industries (active 1891-1924) began with the aim of reviving handcraft and providing employment for rural women, but went on to achieve distinction in woven and embroidered fabrics. This accomplishment was largely due to Garnett's abilities as colourist and designer, skills developed informally through personal interchange with other practitioners. Garnett moved from amateur craftsperson to professional designer through the necessity of providing designs to be executed by her outworkers and staff.

Object-based researchers have often raised the issue of amateur or professional work. This is especially complicated in needlework where, amateur skills reached a high level, and where professionals sought to cut costs by finding ways to reduce skilled work. Susan North (TH 39-1) noted the lack of literature tracing physical distinctions between professional and domestic embroidery, but reasoned that professional embroidery, paid by the piece, had to be executed in a timely manner, hence "no time was wasted tidying up the reverse…" (102). Moira Thunder (TH 37-1) looked at evidence for the circulation of patterns for outworking, raising the complexities of interactions between professional pattern drawers and amateur embroiderers, and the role of retailers in linking the two. It may be that Trilling's distinction between patron-led and maker-led design may offer a better perspective from which to analyse combined design practices than the amateur-professional dichotomy.[7]

Writing about designers of the recent past tends toward the heroic mode, portraying the designer in isolation as visionary and pioneer. Michael Hann and K. Powers (TH 40-2) described Tibor Reich's career through his important commissions, while drawing out his main influences. Reich ability to communicate with technicians and mill managers engendered creative collaborations, opening new possibilities. While he looked forward to freeing design from mechanical limitations, even anticipating computerised control of weaving, technical constraints were in fact an important stimulus to his innovations.

Helen Taylor (TH 41-1), writing about the career of Bernat Klein, worked from archival sources, helping her to highlight the large network of other designers, suppliers, manufacturers and agents crucial in the designer's working environment. She pointed to the role of Lili Ann Corporation in San Francisco and Dumas Maury in Paris in exporting Klein's fabrics in the 1960s. Perhaps Klein's textural work owes a debt to yarn designers like Margaret Leischner's who worked for the fancy yarn spinner R. Greg and Co. And studies of nineteenth-century precedents for dyeing and printing yarns to form variegated fabrics are needed in order to put Klein's innovations into context. There is a rich field open for contributions that further our understanding of the interconnectivity of design practice.

Historical sources for the study of design

In the early years of the journal, Negley Harte (TH 5) provided an invaluable guide to the textile entries in *Rees' Cyclopaedia*, identifying authors and the dates of their contributions. These articles, although mainly concerned with technology, have broad implications for design. Progress in historical research depends on access to and understanding of key works. Digitisation has massively improved access to texts, but critical guidance to historical texts remains thin. For example, in 1956, John Irwin signalled Daniel Havart's 1693

traveller's account *Op-en Ondergang van Coromandel* (The rise and fall of Coromandel) as "an indispensable work" (62).[8] Yet still no translation or annotated version has been published.

The accounts written by designers themselves are crucial sources, but require contextualisation to interpret if their views are idiosyncratic or representative. Lesley Miller's work (TH 29-1) on the silk designer Jacques-Charles Dutillieu, one of three key authors on the eighteenth-century Lyon silk industry, provides a model of such a contextual study. She found that Dutillieu's account emphasised Parisian artists as innovators in preference to native Lyonnais designers, probably reflecting his own background as a Parisian incomer. This understanding opens the field for re-examination of important developments in the silk industry of the 1730s and 1740s.

Besides the relatively small group of writings by designers, there is a much larger field of publications made for the use of designers that awaits assessment. Naomi Tarrant (TH 16-1) introduced the theme of sources for design in a brief article making the connection between an engraving by Robert Hancock published by Robert Sayer in *The Ladies Amusement* in 1762, and a later copperplate-printed cotton from Bromley Hall. Deborah Swallow (TH 30-1) re-examined Watson's multi-volume 1867 *Textile Manufactures of India*, and its subsequent second series of the 1870s, intended as a form of trade museum of samples for the use of designers and manufacturers in developing new products for export. Swallow noted Watson's inclination towards manufactures that had not yet received attention from British manufacturers, notably higher quality woven production. However, she observes Watson's project was eventually counteracted by the activity of George Birdwood and others fighting for the preservation of craft traditions at the end of the nineteenth century.

Illustrated botanical and natural history texts form another rich category of publications for elucidation within the design context. These works were widely combed as source material for textile motifs during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Tracking such sources and the genealogy of motifs is essential for our understanding of design.

Innovation and imitation

From the publication of Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* in 1936, histories of design have focused on innovation. But, looking more closely, it is difficult to prise novelty apart from the influence of the vast repertoire of past models. Brett saw no contradiction in being "absolutely up to date and simultaneously rooted in vernacular tradition."[9] Margaret Perivoliotis (TH 36-1) presented an academic project aimed at getting young designers to do precisely that. This was articulated under the guise of being "inspired by" historical models. Such exercises point to the problematic created by the contemporary promotion of originality and disparagement of imitation. Past designers learned their trade by copying, and through translating the designs of others; repurposing and recombination of design motifs was accepted practice. Moira Thunder (TH 45-1) demonstrated the problems raised in museum cataloguing by systems steeped in the conception of a single originator for design: the artist/maker. The nature of production processes that involve tracing of motifs, adapting available models, and combining parts of existing patterns are consequently obscured. Within the study of women's embroidery, Thunder saw this reinforcing a culture that regards amateur work as less significant, pointing to the need for socially sensitive cataloguing. By definition, folk art evolves out of untutored design practices using established patterns, often with high symbolic content that engenders repetition. Nicolas

Thornton's (TH 28-2) examination of the features of British smocks found great diversity, and exceptions to every generalisation about smocks. This is a reminder that non-professionals can range in expression from restriction to freedom as much as professionals.

An instance of imitation of woven design during the eighteenth century was revealed by Dominique Cardon (TH 29-1) in an examination of French versions of Venetian wool stuffs for export to Ottoman centres. Archives in the Languedoc region hold samples obtained in the past for the purpose of product substitution. These samples, still in pristine condition, allowed structural comparisons that found the Venetian *sayes* with a higher warp count, and their French imitators a higher weft count. When raised, the nap of the Venetian product was constituted of the finer, more expensive, merino warp yarns, while the more competitive French product had a weft-based nap. Here we can see how the motivation for imitation led to innovation.[10]

Imitation carried to an extreme gave rise to public debates about design in the 1830s because of the perception that British industrial design was falling behind that of France, and that too much money was being spent abroad for designs. Tortuous nineteenth-century discussions clouded the real economic drivers for this under the issue of 'taste', leaving a rich and contradictory body of evidence. Toshio Kusamitsu (TH 12) clarified the manufacturer's perspective on design "dominated by the justification and support of the division of labour" while criticism of the status quo came from outside the production sector. Hazel Clark (TH 15-1) argued that the desire to keep costs low, and a market that "was less than discerning about design" (110) acted to hold back the development of skilled designers in industrial Lancashire. However, this was perhaps to undervalue the types of skill developed. Practising designer Thomas Bull wrote in 1853 that it was ordinary styles for

printing on "coarse cloth at limited expense" that tested the ingenuity of the designer most greatly.[11]

Copying of designs, condemned as "piracy," led to changes in copyright law in Britain in the early 1840s. David Greysmith's (TH 14-2) seminal essay, "Patterns, Piracy and Protection in the Textile Printing Industry" elucidates the debates of the period, their politics and incoherencies. He drew attention to how entangled copying was in the practice of design creation. In the eighteenth century, copying was openly admitted, and the protest was about "base and mean copies" that undercut prices (166). In the early nineteenth century, most manufacturers looked to Paris fashions and frequently adapted elements of French designs. Many also looked to old English designs as source material, with established firms making use of their back-catalogue of patterns. Hence, the stringencies of fashion and the practicalities of design recycling ensured that forms of copying continued. For manufacturers, copyright was about a temporary advantage allowing exploitation of their property in design, not about a long-term claim to artistic originality.[12] Modern conceptions of originality are at odds with practice, and the Western cultural anxiety about copying seems to stand in the way of a better understanding of the close entanglements of imitation and innovation.

Luxury and the everyday

Until recent years, textile historians have given most attention to luxury textiles due in part to the higher survival rate of high-end silks, embroideries and furnishing fabrics. These are also the traditional subjects of art history as governed by a connoisseurship approach widely adopted by design historians. This imbalance was noted by Stanley Chapman and Serge

Chassagne who pointed out that "most writers on textile printing have failed to notice the importance of the popular market…".[13] When this market is examined, for instance in Greysmith's work on the 1840s (TH 14-2), "the conventional view of the designs of the period is scarcely recognizable…" (183). Revision is needed in order to understand the entanglements of design for higher and lower market spheres. Similarly, the interrelationship of designs for garment and furnishing fabrics would benefit from investigation. Greysmith noted the design registration of garment prints within the furnishing category, which suggests that dress fashions may have been regularly mined for furnishing ideas. Likewise, techniques arising in furnishing, such as "rainbowing" were soon adopted for dress styles. Such movements between design spheres warrant study.

Interrelationships of design with materials and technology

David Mitchell's (TH 40-1) examination of the Orphans Court Inventories tracked the preferences for fabrics and colours in London houses and compared these with similar records from Paris. He found green the most popular colour for bed hangings in Paris "whilst in London there was a notable rise in the popularity of blue largely at the expense of green during the second half of the seventeenth century" (25). Mitchell posits these differences may have been underpinned by dyeing technology, reflecting France's support for its native woad (pastel) industry, whereas England adopted the more efficient imported indigo.

The interrelationship of textile design with new materials and technologies has been an historical strand of considerable importance. Design historians are interested in the constraints of technology, and in the technical flaws whereby technologies of production are revealed. Woven design, in common with other "matrix arts," involves combination and

variation at a high level of constraint, making some level of technical understanding essential. Jean-Paul Leclercq saw this as an invitation to study the generative processes guiding production: "…the principle of the *deconstruction* of fabrics is something that art historians need to master the same as designers and manufacturers."[14]

Rachel Worth (TH 30-2) portrayed the changing relation of design to materials and technology within Marks and Spencer clothing since the 1930s. The Design Department at M&S had an interpretive role, "to *translate* fashion trends" into fabrics, colours and styling appropriate for the long-wearing, easy-to-launder, good-value reputation of the brand. In the 1950s and '60s, this could take the form of editing Paris fashions to those that suited their popular colour co-ordinated jersey wear ranges. This tempering of aesthetic goals with balancing economic and technical criteria seems to characterise design briefs in the British sphere from the long nineteenth century onward.

Simplicity and complexity

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.[15] But the historianship of complexity still awaits its champion. Peter Thornton saw 'density', from openness to close-packing, as a crucial distinction between 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."[16] 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 cites as design hubs operating in conjunction during specified time periods. The shifting importance of the various hubs, their alliances and re-alliances, and their itinerant design workforce warrant examination in greater depth.

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 through digitised images. Sally Tuckett and Stana Nenadic (TH 43-2) presented the results of their study of the United Turkey Red archive comprising some 200 pattern books held by the National Museums Scotland. This material was one of the first archive groups of industrial design to be acquired by a museum substantially intact, an admirable leap of faith at the time since its size and condition were problematic from the start. The authors illustrate the situation encountered by Scottish designers working within non-European conventions, and responding to written exchanges from distant agents. While the merchant's goal was imperialistic, one of product

substitution undercutting indigenous production, the designer, by contrast, remained in a position of service toward the taste of the foreign consumer.

The interchange between East and West is a perennial subject in design history. David Brett (TH29-2) takes on the issue of orientalism in a discussion of the Kashmir shawl and its European imitations. He advances that "the 'orient' of orientalism was always more about Europe than Asia (124)." Eastern pattern design provided Europe with a lever for design reform. By 1845, European cashmere shawls were being created within "a system in which the point of provenance is of less importance than the system of linkages bearing upon its design and marketing [… a] dialectical interchange between an 'East' and a 'West', in which both those terms were being constantly defined and redefined (124)."

Summary

At its outset, *Textile History* did not have a stated agenda for design studies. Over the years, this has invited an eclectic and experimental mixture of contributions. This has left gaps in expected areas such as foundational studies, and the critical commentary of historical texts. However, important themes since the early years have been the practice of design, and contributions to the debate about innovation versus imitation. This review has pointed to emergent themes that place a new *emphasis* on design networks, transfer between different design spheres, and geographical interconnectivity.

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[1] Thornton, P. (1998) *Form & Decoration: Innovation in the decorative arts 1470-1870*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

[2] Trilling, J. (2001) *The Language of Ornament*. London: Thames & Hudson.

[3] Ibid., Trilling, p. 11.

[4] Brett, D. (1992) *On Decoration*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press. Brett, D. (2005) *Rethinking Decoration: Pleasure & ideology in the visual arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[5] Puetz, A. (1999) "Design instruction for artisans in eighteenth-century Britain" *Journal of Design History*, 12 (3), pp. 217-39.

[6] A notable exception is Charles Swaisland's "Rules for the Drawing Shop" dated around 1845. National Art Library: MSL/1964/774.

[7] Combined practice also occurs in the fully professional field, for instance free-lance studio designs adapted by in-house industrial teams.

[8] Irwin, J. (1956) "Bibliography of Indian Textiles. Part II. Travellers' Records, 1300-1700 A.D." *Journal of Indian Textile History*, 2, 58-62.

[9] Op. cit. Brett, D. (2005), p. 238.

[10] Maxine Berg thoroughly elucidates this theme in: "From imitation to invention: creating commodities in eighteenth-century Britain" *Economic History Review*, LV (1), (2002), pp. 1-30. Another driver for innovation is cost-cutting. Clare Rose (TH 38-1) examined this in mass-produced boy's clothing in the last half of the nineteenth century using registered design and copyright records.

[11] Bull, Thomas (1853) *A voice from the bench*. Manchester, 8.

[12] Greysmith's argument is carried further by Laura Kriegel (2004) "Culture and the Copy: Calico, capitalism and design copyright in early Victorian Britain" *Journal of British Studies*, 43 (Apr), pp.233-65.

[13] Chapman, S. D. and Chassagne, S. (1981) *European Textile Printers in the Eighteenth Century: A study of Pell and Oberkampf*. London: Heinemann & Pasold Fund, p.204.

[14] Leclercq, J.-P. & R. Labrusse (2016) "Entretien avec Jean-Paul Leclercq par Rémi Labrusse" *Perspective: Actualité en histoire de l'art*, (1), 61-74. Accessed on-line https://journals.openedition.org/perspective/6303

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

[16] 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.