

Question 2: Define skill in the context of your own practice and the work of 2 artists/ designers/ makers from the lecture series

Name: Caryl Bulman

Student Number: 2104182

Module Course: Research in Context ADAD5003

Course: BA (Hons) Surface Pattern Design and Textiles

Word Count: 2,574

Lecture: Julia Lockheart

This essay aims to define skill through the eye of a Surface Pattern Designer with influence taken from two artists, Tom of Holland and Grinling Gibbons, by identifying skill within their work. Firstly, I will begin by appreciating the principles of design by Owen Jones and then define the hands' function and its relationship with the brain. Following on, the essay then delves deeper into specific skills such as the relationship with the tool with examples through the work of Grinling Gibbons. The main skill within his work is also appreciating the beauty of handmade work through handicrafts. With this in mind, the skill of knowing when to make the final mark is explained. Finally, this essay will explore the skill of being resourceful through the work of Tom of Holland. Further skills then arise from his work including the skill of learning to accept errors.

Skills are a combination of everything, the building blocks of art and design. Skill can be defined as "a particular ability that you develop through training and experience." (Cambridge Dictionary) To gain that skill, practice and mastery will make you adept in your chosen practice. John Ruskin stated "we cannot teach Art as an abstract skill or power." (Nevelson, 1972, p.372) His theory proves, it is within us artists to transfer skill and knowledge within the brain and let them be revealed in the hands' making. The theory of skill aims to explore psychological and physiological mechanisms underlying skill development. Factors play a role in influencing an individual's ability to learn and perform a certain skill such as practice and repetition.

Many artists believe that set principles determine their design and broaden their skill of making. Taking into consideration the fundamental principles of design. Jones created principles in the arrangement of form in art included in his book 'The Grammar of Ornament' which outlines his beliefs in propositions. Proposition 11 links well with my practice of surface pattern design, with the consideration of surface. "In surface decoration, all lines should flow out." (Jones, 1868, p.6) Interpreting this would be to have an open-mindedness to not be constrained and restricted within a space or square on a page. Designs should flourish naturally outside the page to give the audience a dept of feeling drawn within the design.

Skills are produced using many different methods, for instance with the help of tools, technology, and the body to be able to achieve art. "It is part material object, part idea, part story, part knowledge, part skills, part individual and part collective structure." (Fletcher, 2016, p.146) With this in mind, without hands, no skill could be performed. "The hand is unique in so far as it combines telling in both of its aspects." Not only touch, but the hand can also tell stories through its gestures in writing, and manipulation of threads as in weaving and embroidery. (Ingold, 2013, p.111) The hand has a mind of its own and has been trained to perform natural and effortless work. From a young age, we are taught how to hold a pen and as years go on, we learn how to write and develop our unique handwriting.

Frank Wilson believed that the "brain is hand and hand is brain." (Ingold, 2013, p.112) To gain a deeper understanding of this quote, one needs to understand the mechanism and relationship of the body. Hands are trained in the thinking of their owner. Without sound or guidance, the hand can perform wonders right in front of the eyes. "The hand is an extension of the brain, not a separate device that is controlled by it." (Ingold, 2013, p.112) The hand has the capability to do almost anything. Each artist's hands are unique and precious, involved in skilled making, as others will be influenced by the practice of artists and designers.

An example of a skill being influenced 300 years later is the work of Grinling Gibbons by the making of the 'Carved Cravat'. Grinling Gibbons is a "master carver in wood, considered an elite and versatile sculptor across a range of materials and forms." (Davis, 2020, p.306) The skills that stand out in Gibbon's work are the "gentle colouration, dramatic shading, and loose pen strokes to give freedom to the details of his designs." (Davis, 2020, p.301) This is truly a mastered skill that has been carefully practiced by the use of one's hand, through applying different pressure and control of hand movement.



Fig 1 V & A- Carved Cravat

As an artist, knowing when to place the final mark on the page is very difficult. Gibbons has achieved a natural balance of detail, extraction, and repeat structure to decide when to finish carving. For instance, “the last line to have been drawn is never the last line that *could* have been drawn” (Ingold, 2009, p.100) We call this process of design: the development stages. Taking into consideration that there is always room for improvement, one can sometimes overwork their design. “It has no end-point, one can never tell when a drawing is finished.” (Klee, 1961, p.105) An artist is asked to have the knowledge and understanding of many skills, one in which to stand back and evaluate if the work is complete or not.

Relating Gibbon’s work to the Surface Pattern course, we undertook a wood carving session during this current semester, and I can appreciate his skill. This skill truly is the hardest skill I have learnt during my years of experimenting with techniques. The persistent effort and continuous hand movement required for this skill are crucial. I nearly gave up on this skill multiple times but there was something that made me want to explore further.

Watching a video from the V & A of a young artist recreating Gibbon’s skills was extraordinary that left me in awe at the skill and mastery within this video. Modern technology these days enabled Fretton to 3D scan and print a copy of the cravat, in which she was then able to cast a model in plaster to re-create it in wood. This is evidence that the younger generation is keeping these skills alive through the influence of artists and designers from the past.

Fretton states that “you get to know the object/tool well because you spend days looking at it and measuring it up, in which you end up seeing and noticing more about it than you would at any other time-for instance in a gallery.” V & A (2021) Leading on with this in mind, this essay will next explore the relationship that an artist has with its tools.

As an artist, a tool is your best friend, carrying an art kit like a handbag wherever you go. Building trust and reliance within a tool is considered a skill. Having time to truly unravel each tool to its full compacity will show the beauty in the process and outcome. A beautiful explanation of using a tool is told by Ingold through the process of ‘Sawing Planks’. He states that “sawing a plank is like going for a walk”. Each tool can provide us with new pathways to explore. “Every stroke, steps do not follow one another in succession.” (Ingold, 2009, p.98) This is true, as every artist will favour their tools after years of engaging with them. The more comfortable one is with their tool; the better understanding of the style others will have.

To contradict this statement, letting go of a tool is also an unnatural skill to master. On one hand, one should thrive at their preferred tool and enhance that, but on the other hand, unexpected results can occur through exploration with a tool.

This is the beauty of art; skills can mean anything or everything that can be adapted or altered. Having built that relationship of trust within a tool, letting loose of a tool should be easier. This can unfold what they do best. As stated by my textile tutor in secondary school, “use the needle of the sewing machine like a pencil”. This has always had an impact on my work as it enabled me to work more freely, exploring different pathways along the material. This is an example of the close relationship that humans have with their tools, for example, a carpenter with a saw as well as an artist with a pencil. The more time we have experimenting with the tools in hand, the possibilities are endless.

“The word ‘craft’ means ‘skill’ hence ‘handicraft’ (Walker, 1989, p.38)

The tool is used to create handmade art in the form of handicrafts and is therefore considered a unique skill to have rather than relying on technology and machines to do the work. Unfortunately, skilled craftsmanship is disappearing as the “decline of hand skills cascaded in the nineteenth century when creative minds turned over the work to the machine.” (Nevelson, 1972, p.371) To keep handicrafts alive, courses like Surface Pattern and Textile aim to cover a range of workshops including screen printing, wood carving, enamelling, stitching, and drawing. The more workshops available, the more multidisciplined one can be with skills that can turn to any craft.

A beautiful quote by Walker believes that “Craft objects are the mark of the hand” (1989, p.38) This is the reason artists or makers like to advertise ‘Handmade with love’. Most tend to buy and appreciate handmade crafts as they know the hard work, effort, dedication, and care gone into making the outcome. The reason that handmade outcomes cost more is that people are paying for the premium of it being unique and handmade through the time and dedication of the maker. “Handmade is a mark of distinction” (Ingold, 2013, p.112) This quote is an example of the blood, sweat, and tears that go into handicraft and marks its way to hold the privilege of being handmade rather than an industrial machine that has no personal connection to the work being produced.

Another skill I would like to discuss in detail is being resourceful. An example showing how being resourceful with the materials to hand can produce unexpected outcomes is ‘flying kites’ in the book ‘Textility of Making’ by Ingold. He uses simple and ordinary materials that he found closest to him such as “fabric, matchstick bamboo, ribbon, tape, glue, and twine.” Some might think he is delusional trying to make a kite fly with these materials, but he got an unexpected surprise with the outcomes. The kite started “twirling, spinning, jumping and nose-diving” in ways he did not expect or intend. (Ingold, 2009, p.95) This is evidence that by exploring ordinary objects, magic can happen through unexpected outcomes.

An example of myself being resourceful was studying a foundation art and design course during covid. This was a struggle for all students not having the access to equipment in college. Workshops were held online and finding tools and materials around the house would be the case. This proved to be difficult at times, but in one instance, a workshop on screen printing was held and we had to grab a pair of tights, an old credit card, an embroidery hoop, and some paper. We produced unique screen-printing outcomes with interesting marks. From that moment on, being resourceful with the choice of material did change my mentality going forward as a developing artist.

An artist who enjoys being resourceful is Tom van Deijnen best known for: 'Tom of Holland', a self-taught textiles practitioner running the programme 'Visible Mending'. He 'makes, remakes, mends, darns, and sews' clothes that either have holes or stains on them. His work has an appreciation for 'Wabi Sabi'. Wabi Sabi" is a principle of design that are two distinct Japanese concepts with 'Wabi' meaning "beauty achieved through imperfections", and 'Sabi' meaning the "beauty that comes with time." (Lidwell, Holden, and Butler, 2010, p.254) The clothes are an imperfection due to the holes made by wear and tear over time but beauty can be achieved through darning precious clothes for an individual to peruse with wearing their favourite clothes.

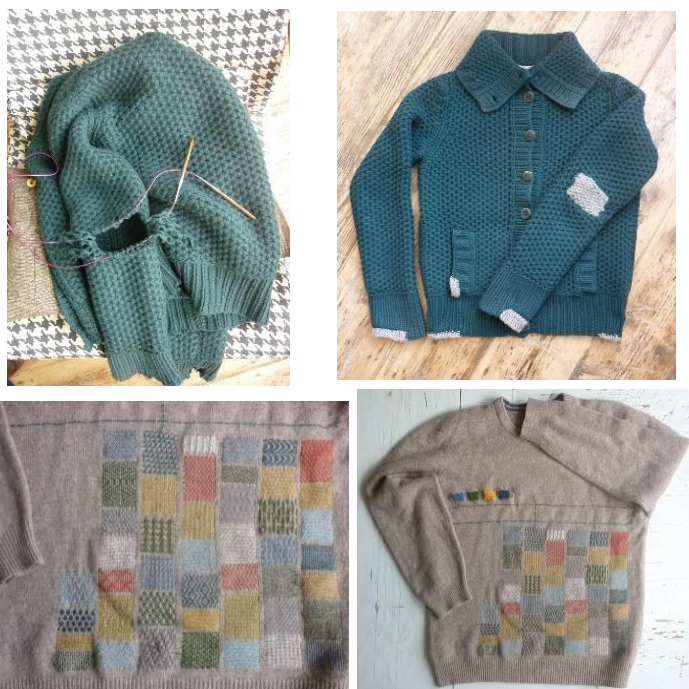


Fig 2,3,4,5 Visible Mending 2019

His skill is very unique that not many would have thought or even considered putting in this much effort when you can easily replace it with a new outfit. But this skill has a more in-depth meaning than just repairing. Deijnen aims to “lengthen the life of clothes” by darning them, he sees “a beautiful darn as a badge of honour, to be worn with pride.” (KDD & Co, 2019) He also takes an interest and explores the relationship between the wearer and the garment, as he questions why would they like it to be repaired and what makes them want to keep it. Similar to Gibbon, he says that he likes to “do things that take forever... as it allows me to gain a deep understanding of material qualities and the traditional techniques used for making.” (Selvedge Magazine, 2019) This is what makes a successful artist with his knowledge of the skill, truly appreciating the beauty that lies within a skill.

Deijnen's skill uses traditional techniques for creating and repairing textiles as he explores the conversation between mending and creating. He believes to be “a real technique geek. I love researching techniques, and the best way is to try them out yourself.” (KDD & Co, 2019) This is how he learns new skills and in most cases is the best way to develop through trial and error.

Leading on from trial and error, the last point of my essay is defining skill through ‘slips’ which are “errors of action or errors of execution- when an action is not what was intended.” (Lidwell, Holden, and Butler, 2010, p.80) Some believe that making mistakes is a failure, and to overcome this issue, they would simply disregard their work and start all over again. In this case, embracing those human errors is a skill. Our course thrives and constantly reminds us to keep all work even if they are not the outcome wished for. “Always incorporate the principles of forgiveness into design.” (Lidwell, Holden, and Butler, 2010, p.80) Previously, I would be very precious with my work and if something went wrong, I would always be disappointed to the point that I would lose confidence and give up. However, this course has changed my perspective on failure and to embrace them as a ‘happy accident’ and a form of experimenting. Some work is also known to be total experimentation with no regard or care for any rules. This is paraphrased well by William Strunk’, “the best designers

sometimes disregard the principles of design” (Lidwell, Holden, and Butler, 2010, p.11) This is another form of skill that some take on board to produce work in their freedom and up making of their own rules and principles that do not follow set design principles.

To conclude, this essay has truly made me understand and appreciate that every motion and action we do as human beings is regarded as a skill. I have learnt that we take skills for granted until we dive deeper to unfold the skills of our subject area. Whilst researching, it was mind-blowing and beautiful to think about how skilled we are as an artist. Skills are embedded within us, nobody will ever be able to take that away from us, nor that we will ever forget the skills within our creative minds. Cherish those skills, and be proud to have the knowledge and understanding of so many skills.

References

Davis, C. (2020) *Grinling Gibbons in context: the vitality of English seventeenth-century sculptural production*, Sculpture Journal

Fletcher, K. (2016). *Craft of Use: Post-Growth Fashion*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

Ingold, T (2009) *Textility of making*. Cambridge Journal of Economics

Ingold, T (2013). *Making: anthropology, archaeology, art, and architecture*. Routledge.

Jones, O. (1868). *The Grammar of Ornament*. United Kingdom: B. Quaritch

Klee, P. (1961). *The Thinking Eye*, Notebooks, Volume 1- London: Lund

Humphries

Lidwell, W., J., Holden, K, Butler. (2010). *Universal Principles of Design, Revised and Updated: 125 Ways to Enhance Usability, Influence Perception, Increase Appeal, Make Better Design Decisions, and Teach Through Design*. United States: Rockport Publishers.

Nevelson, M. (1972). *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* by David Pye, The Arts and Crafts Movement by Gillian Naylor (review). Leonardo (Oxford)

Norman, D (1988) *The Design of Everyday Things*. United States: Basic Books

Walker, J. (2015). *Craft and Design*. In *Design History and the History of Design* (p. 38–). Pluto Press.

Online

Cambridge Dictionary. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/skill>

(Accessed 5th December)

KDD & Co (2014) *A chat with Tom of Holland*. Available at: <https://kddandco.com/2014/04/20/a-chat-with-tom-of-holland/> (Accessed 27th November 2022)

Selvedge Magazine (2019) *Visible Mending with Tom of Holland*. Available at:

<https://www.selvedge.org/blogs/selvedge/visible-mending-with-tom-of-holland> (Accessed 27th November 2022)

Visible Mending (NA) *Tom of Holland*. Available at: <https://visiblemending.com/products/tom-of-holland> (Accessed 27th November 2022)

Imagery

Figure 1: V & A (1690) *Carved cravat*, by Grinling Gibbons, about 1690, London, England.

Victoria and Albert Museum. Available at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/grinling-gibbons-an-introduction> (Accessed 27th November 2022)

Figure 2, 3,4, and 5: KDD & Co (2014) *A chat with Tom of Holland*. Available at:

<https://kddandco.com/2014/04/20/a-chat-with-tom-of-holland/> (Accessed 27th November 2022)

Video

V & A (2021) *How was it made? Carving Grinling Gibbons' cravat*. Available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWDj4ze_nok&ab_channel=VictoriaandAlbertMuseum

(Accessed 27th November)