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Craft, Couture and Technology

This essay explores keywords including *craft*, *couture* and *technology*, and how they relate to my own practice. I will investigate why skill is so important in the artistic community, touching on art therapy and high-end luxury fashion items seen on runways. I will look at the effects that creating has on people, and research how patience and persistence is so important when creating a piece of art; how makers should enjoy and respect the process of their creation, and the different means of working in the 21st century, such as the use of technology alongside traditional practices like knitting. I will emphasise the importance of skill in fashion and textile design, which are the areas I am particularly passionate about in my own work.

Craft is defined as a 'skill and experience, especially in relation to making objects'. It can incorporate anything from embroidery to furniture craft. Craftspeople are by definition talented, having such a passion and keen eye to be able to practice their delicate skill. Craft is commonly associated with the older generation, but in recent years hobbies such as crochet and knitting have achieved much greater popularity within a younger age range, partly due to the increased free time and enforced isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic fibre crafts became accepted within the younger generation, this was shown through the rise of social media over the pandemic; to share your whole life on social media supported an isolated population. People developed the mind set that they could do anything as 'considerable limitations arose' (Stein, L. 2021, p. 8) meaning that the pandemic gave us a unique opportunity to pursue an interest without the usual distractions of daily life. As a result, a breath of creativity bloomed among particularly females. Lynne Stein in her book 'Shedding the Shackles' (2021) talks about how over the last 30 years she has witnessed first hand women exploiting the 'therapeutic power' (Stein, L. 2021, p. 9) of creating and respecting the time and effort that creating a textile piece takes. Textile design crafts such as crochet which 'requires outstanding patience and attention to detail', (Stein, L. 2021, p. 8) should be afforded greater attention because of their traditional methods that have been around for generations.

The art of crochet has become particularly prevalent in young girls. Research shows how crochet can "enhance girls' sense of belonging that may influence their confidence and identity" (Zhang et al., 2022). A research experiment was done to identify that creative outlets can help your productivity, in this case through fibre art. In this article they describe a study where crocheting was introduced to STEM students (young females) of whom none

had crocheted before. They explained how crochet made them feel “calm and happier” (Zhang et al., 2022). These young girls found peace in the form of crocheting and were able to find a way out of their intense studying. They were able to connect over the crocheting and found it fascinating to learn new stitches and ways of working. Bonding over their unique learning experience and gaining motivation in their work; almost using crochet as a kind of art therapy.

Art therapy is very common among females and is especially used in the corrections system. It is proven how art therapy ‘is an effective way for incarcerated women to express themselves and their emotions’ (Silton, N.R. 2023, p.49). In an environment that is common for illiteracy and other difficulties, art therapy acts as a way for women to communicate their thoughts through the means of creativity and expression. This article shows how this is positively benefitting the justice system from taking the inmates mindset from being ‘potentially destructive’ to an ‘overall increase in mood’ (Silton, N.R. 2023, p.50). Many of the women who are in the justice system have been previous victims of traumatic experiences such as ‘relationship abuse and sexual violence’ (Silton, N.R. 2023, p. 57). This art therapy is helping them to process their emotions and helping them cope with the thoughts that are potentially deadly to themselves or others. Furthermore, giving them space to breathe and think before adjusting back into society where things could become destructive yet again. However, this new outlet for creativity could contribute to minimising the risk of the women from potentially returning behind the prison walls.

An artist who specialises in craft and mental health is Angela Maddock. Her connection with craft began when she was a little girl, fascinated by watching her grandma ‘knit like her life depended on it’ (Hackney, F. 2022, p. 2). She explains how art is all about connection and how there is no surprise to her how we all embraced art in the pandemic to ease our isolation and bring everyone together over social media. (Hackney, F. 2022, p. 8). Making us realise that with every movement of each strand that is put into a piece; that each part of the piece is connected somehow, just like society. From watching her mum and grandma create jumpers and other projects since she was small, Maddock created a piece called ‘Bloodline’ which she describes as ‘an intensely affective experience’ (Hackney, F. 2022, p. 3). After sadly losing a loved one Maddock began creating a collaborative piece of knitting with her mother. (Maddock, A. n.d.). The piece tells a story of how two lives have an undeniable connection and bond of love.



Figure 1. Maybin, E. (n.d.) *Bloodline*.

Couture or more specifically *Haute Couture* is a 'central conception to the study of the history of French high sewing' (Armitage, J. 2022) *Haute Couture* clothing is hand sewn with incredible attention to detail and is only carried out by the most talented seamstresses and tailors, it's early usage was to create exclusive and custom clothing which was an extension to high end fashion for the ultra wealthy. It was often created with unusual materials not typically seen on the high street. (Armitage, J. 2022).

The birth of *Haute Couture* is 'set around the date of 1858 with the opening of a shop and couture salon by Charles Frederick Worth' (Lehmann, U. 2005) In this period of time the decorative arts were blossoming and suggests reason for the extremely wealthy to show hierarchy through the means of their clothes. *Haute Couture* gave an outlet of self expression amongst society, as well as showing off wealth and social class.

Haute Couture is all about the time and precision of the creation of the garment, the connection the designer has with the piece to create a one-of-a-kind, made-to-order item. In high-end *Haute Couture* fashion brands, there are only 'approximately 4000' (Bala, D. 2020) worldwide customers. With an even smaller invite-only runway show. These leading designers such as Cristobal Balenciaga display an exceptional craftsmanship they have practised for years to 'exhibit a quality of craftsmanship that meets the level required to show on the official *Haute Couture* schedule.' (Bala, D. 2020).

Balenciaga has a very unique way of designing for the female body, his skilled craftsmanship shines through his 'mysterious designs' (Black, S. 2018) changing the way people viewed women's fashion. By questioning the typical hourglass figure of a woman and

creating new boundaries for women's fashion that the runways had not seen before. He experimented with draping cloth, and gathered inspiration for his designs by creating 'sculptural forms that stood away from the body' (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.). An example of this is his unique style is his radical idea of his 1957 'sack dress' (See figure 2). In a time period of the typical hourglass shape (V&A, 2017), Balenciaga surprised all of the media with his unusual design, pushing fashion boundaries and making them question what women should dress like, changing women's fashion design forever.



Figure 2. Balenciaga, C. (1957) *Sack Dress*.

Balenciaga's passion for fashion design is very clear, he not only designs these garments but is also a part of the assembly and creation of the piece, meticulously placing and stitching each piece together by hand, creating connections and bonds to the piece he is creating. To create something so time consuming and delicate leads the maker to connect closer to a piece of work. The garment grows as you grow, leaving behind all of your experiences in the article of clothing, a bit like a diary.

Even after Balenciaga's death in 1972, he still continues to inspire upcoming fashion designers from his connection he built with his work, learning how to respect the time making the garment and loving the process as well as the final outcome. As that is what shows through his designs; hard work and patience.

Technology as a noun is '(the study and knowledge of) the practical, especially industrial, use of scientific discoveries'. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019) However I will be exploring technology through the means of fashion. In recent years the fashion industry has developed in parallel with technological advances, enabling designers to incorporate new ideas into their work.

Dutch designer Iris Van Herpen is known for 'morphing art, fashion and technology' (Smelik, A, 2019. p. 8). Her groundbreaking designs blur the boundary between fashion and technology, by experimenting with new materials that are not thought of from a fashion perspective. Using materials such as carbon, ceramics and inorganic fibres she creates extraordinary and unexplainable garments that make people question if this is really a piece of clothing.

Iris van Herpen is inspired by the 'natural sciences' (Mead, R. 2017) and we see this in her 2015 Spring collection runway show named "Magnetic Motion". This was inspired by a visit to 'CERN and the Large Hadron Collider' (Nast, C. 2014) which is located in Sweden. This trip sparked Van Herpen's creativity and was fascinated by creating something that looks invisible. Balancing on the border of a piece of textile that is seen as fashion and something that looks like technology.



Figure 3. Vlamos, Y. (2014) *Magnetic Motion-Look 1*.

In figure 3 we see where the runway show began, with models wearing structured black patent leather, which functioned like an almost exoskeleton (Nast, C. 2014) this could have connotations to the armour workers have to wear at the CERN and Large Hadron Collider

which Van Herpen visited previously to protect them from the immense magnetic field. This runway show then progressed on to the stars of the show. (See figure 4) Which was a 'physical embodiment in silicone of invisible magnetic forces' (Nast, C. 2014) testing the boundaries between fashion, technology and the way that people perceive the scientific world.



Figure 4. Vlamos, Y. (2014) *Magnetic Motion-Look 31*.

In figure 4 we see a '3D-printed transparent dress covered in crystalline formations' (Howarth, D. 2014). This almost glass like looking dress shows the incredible detail that goes into creating one of Van Herpen's garments, from the planning and designing of the dress to 3D printing them we can see the sheer amount of time and patience creating a piece like this takes. Representing yet again how passion for your practice and respect for the creation of the garment really pays off.

These designs were created using 3D technology, Van Herpen worked alongside artist Jolan van der Weil and architect Philip Beesly (Howard, D. 2014) to create these space-like designs. The pieces from this collection almost look like sculptures, using new technology such as 3D printing, she creates an almost 'unwearable looking' garment, playing with the shape of the female body she creates incredible silhouettes that the fashion industry have not seen before.

However, not all technologies have helped the fashion industry. Since the 'production of ready-made clothing' (Godley, A. 1997) we have seen labour massively increase, especially since the rise of fast-fashion. In recent years buying clothes online is only a few taps away and the technology that we are using to buy these clothes efficiently online gives massive

consequences to the workers. The fast fashion industry is a 'labour-intensive' (Taplin, I, M. 2014) and incredibly competitive industry. Famous for 'low-wage labour' (Taplin, I, M. 2014) consumers all know about the harsh realities of buying from these companies. As a result of these low paid and hard-working jobs, research suggests that the reason behind these low quality clothes is the time scale that takes to create them. There is no care or thought put into these garments, purely the industry that is hungry for money; resulting in poor-quality clothing and poorly paid workers.

Conclusion

In this essay I have explored how skill is key in design by deconstructing how skill in craft can be used to drastically improve mental health amongst women of all ages; exploring the deeper meaning behind simply crocheting or knitting. To then explore how couture fashion brands such as Balenciaga use immense skill and precision in their work to create runway-worthy designs that are solely made to fit for one person only. Furthering my research into the precision of modern-day technology in fashion that seems simple, yet the passion and skill designers need to have for these garments is immense and needs to be shown the thought, time and effort that lies behind closed doors of these projects. As well as the designer that grows with a design through the making process and how learning to respect the time to create a piece with your own hands is a beautiful thing and should not be seen as a burden. Through this essay I have explored women and men in textile and fashion design and have discovered a passion for the potential discovery of the effect of the skill of craft such as crochet in women. I would love to have a further discussion about the mental effects creating and making can have on women and explore further into the traditional methods and skills that have been passed down for generations. Possibly exploring different cultures and practices and potentially comparing these crafts from different areas of the world, maybe reflecting on expertise I have personally witnessed. This has finally led me to the question: *How is skill and craft affecting the lives of women of all ages positively and negatively through the means of fashion and textile design?*

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