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Course title: Surface pattern design

Word count: 2,462

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Define skill in the context of your own practice and the work of two artists/makers/designers from the lecture series.

This paper looks at the skills required by a surface pattern designer. As a starting point the design process is considered to find specific skills needed to be a surface pattern designer. The design styles of two successful designers are compared to see the way they work and what skills they have. Finally, the theories put forward by some thinkers on design are considered.

Skill can be defined as “a particular ability that you develop through training and experience and that is useful in a job” (Cambridge, 2023). Skills required will vary depending on the particular subject and especially whether it is an academic or creative subject.

Inspiration is defined as “the process of being mentally stimulated to do or to feel something especially to do something creative” (Cambridge, 2023). While skills give the designer the technical ability to create something the starting point for any project is an idea. This idea will be inspired by something, the designers background, surroundings, research or travel. Zandra Rhodes was initially inspired by her mother, who had an art background. Her designs have been inspired by travel. Orla Kiely was inspired by her grandmother to work hard and complete projects and specifically by nature and her surroundings growing up in Ireland.

Surface pattern design can be described as “the act of creating art for the surfaces of mass-produced products” (Silver, 2022). This can include wallpaper, wrapping paper, upholstery, quilting fabric, apparel fabric, wall and floor coverings and, in fact, any material onto which a pattern can be applied. To try to identify the specific skills which a surface pattern designer needs a good starting point is the entry requirements of universities offering degree courses in the subject. University of Wales Trinity St David has basic academic requirements, but the priority is “a strong commitment to art and/or design”. Staffordshire University has similar academic requirements, but the priority is “evidence of sequential, logical idea development”. These study requirements link back to the idea that a good designer has a combination of skills and the ability to apply those skills to create a surface pattern.

Many types of patterns originate thousands of years ago such as paisley going back to Persia in the 3rd century. Patterns were traditional with skills passed through the generations. Today designers have access to a very large range of pattern styles. Skills needed include the ability to combine symbols, colours and textures and, more recently, the use of computer based digital design techniques to create a pattern.

A typical design project will include the following stages.

Research:

This stage will vary with each job. If the design brief is detailed less research will be required than if the brief is only an outline. With use of computers, the designers have access to large amounts of research.

Initial design

This is an outline of the design based on research and analysis of the brief. If the designer does not have the skill to get these right further stages of the process will not produce the right result. The initial design can be drawn, painted or digitally produced requiring the designer to have artistic and technical skills. While many designers still rely on free hand designs a lot of design work is done using computer design programmes and IT skills are essential.

Developing the design

A designer needs the skills to use colour, texture, different materials and techniques to produce a design which meets the design brief. The skills may be used to follow design rules, such as the colour wheel. However, some designers have the skill to break these rules. For example, Abigail Ahern chooses successfully to ignore a lot of colour rules.

Techniques

Different production techniques will be suitable for different designs and materials and designers need the skills to use them. Examples include freehand painting, screen printing, digital printing, embroidery and photoshop. Zandra Rhodes chooses to do hand painting because this is more authentic. She then produces all her work individually using hand-screen printing.

Presentation of finished design

If the design is based on a design brief the designer needs the skill to present the finished design and persuade the client that it fits the brief. Designers such as Zandra Rhodes produce their own designs, which they make up into finished garments for sale in their own shop and a different type of presentation is needed.,

Comparing the university entry requirements and the backgrounds of designers such as Zandra Rhodes and Orla Kiely it may be thought that art is the main skill required for a surface pattern designer but the examples above of the stages of the design process clearly show that a much wider range of skills is required. In addition, general skills are essential for employment. According to Cottrell (2021), “everyone needs to have improved decision making, time for thought and action.” This is important because without any of these skills it would be hard to get employment as these skills are needed in all type of work and not just design.

The natural skill or talent to use the taught skills is the secret to making a successful designer. In 1981 Roger Sperry was awarded the Nobel prize for his split-brain theory. This argued that the brain is divided into two halves with different characteristics in each half and an individual's ability is based on whether the left or right side of the brain is more dominant. The theory is not accepted by everyone but even if it is true in looking at the skills needed for a surface pattern designer the theory does not work because characteristics from both sides of the brain are required. The entry requirements needed by universities and the backgrounds of the two designers referred to in this paper would suggest that art is the most important skill for a surface pattern designer meaning that someone with a right dominant brain would be a good designer. However, it is clear from looking at the design process and Cottrell that other skills are required such as analysis, logic and idea, which are on the left side of the brain. A successful designer should not therefore have left or right dominant brain.

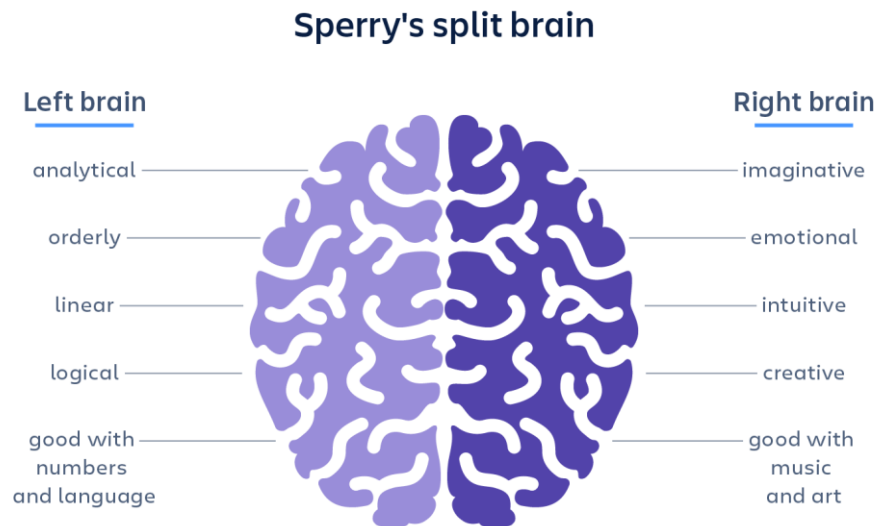


Figure 1: Sperry's theory of the left and right sides of the brain (atlasassian, 2023)

Another theory which helps explain how skills are used to create a design is “head, heart, hands and humour” formulated by David Orr in the 1990’s and developed by John Wood (Wood, 2021) specifically in the context of art and design.

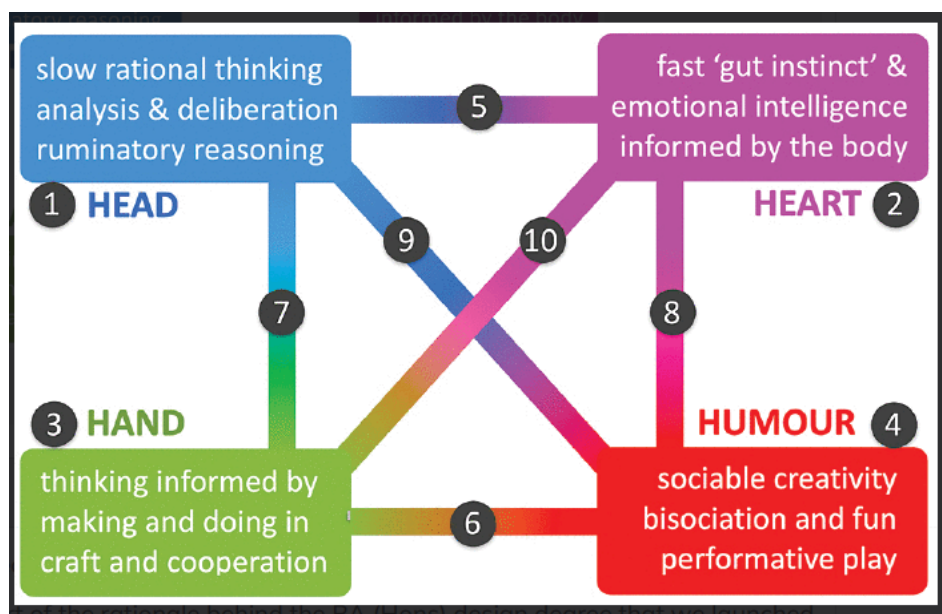


Figure 2: Orr's four modes of reasoning (Wood, 2021)

This theory is based on the idea that the head, heart, hand and humour need to work together to create the final outcome. Wood looked at applying the theory to the way art is taught combining the “four modes of reasoning” (Wood, 2021) instead of using them individually.

Many thinkers have been concerned that design skills could be lost. William Morris and John Ruskin were so concerned that the Industrial Revolution would destroy design that they founded the Art and Crafts movement in 1840. Morris said that “production by machinery was altogether an evil”. “Many consider Morris to be Britain’s greatest designer” (Morris & Waggoner, 2003). It is not clear what skills made him such a great designer. He started life studying theology intending to join the clergy, but he became disillusioned with the church and became a painter, architect, furniture designer and poet as well as textile pattern designer. It can be said that modern surface pattern design started with Morris.

More recently philosopher Vilém Flusser argued that commercial pressures in manufacturing risked ignoring design. Flusser (2017) said that “Design gives form to formless chaos”. In a series of essays, he looked at design of several everyday items and activities such as photography.

While Morris and Flusser were concerned about the risk of machine-made items ignoring good design, Kiely is an example of how mass-produced items, wallpapers and homeware, can include good design. Today many manufacturing companies recognise the importance of design to be successful. Some such as Dyson have more designers than engineers even though the products they make are functional rather than artistic.

Another way of looking at designer skills is to compare two well-known designers.

Zandra Rhodes is a successful English fashion designer with a career lasting over 50 years. Her mother had a background in fashion and Rhodes describes her as one of her greatest influences. Rhodes had an art-based education, studying at Medway College. On graduating she had difficulty getting work because her bold, colourful prints were not generally liked, and she ended up opening her very own fashion house. Her style eventually became very popular and she became known as the princess of punk because of the designs she did based on the punk

rock era where holes, chains and safety pins were fashionable accessories. She is recognisable by her pink hair, which translates into her work.

She was inspired by pop art and advertising, including cosmetics advertising in her early career, and once said that her favourite design is her “lipsticks” (Marks, 2019).



Figure 3: initial ideas from Rhodes' travels (Fashion and Textile Museum, 2020)

Her design process starts with hand drawing or painting a design on paper and then hand-screen printing onto fabric, using different fabrics depending on what is fashionable at the time. She starts by drawing out initial ideas that she has which mostly come from her love of travel. In her opinion this is the best way to start on a project as her early training and art school “instilled in her an understanding of the importance of drawing within a creative practice” (Rhodes, 2020) and has carried this on ever since. She thinks it is important to draw something once a day.



Figure 4: Rhodes' design sketches (Fashion and Textile Museum, 2020)

Orly Kiely is an Irish fashion designer based in London. She was educated at the National College of Art and Design. She began her career designing hats, handbags and other items including kitchenware. She was inspired by architecture, which gave her work strong geometric lines, and nature. "Nature is a great source of pattern ideas." Living in Ireland was a big influence on Kiely's use of colour, for example greens, greys and browns. She has been called "the queen of prints" (Abrahams, 2009) because of her dedication to printed materials and how popular and widely recognised her designs now are.

Her favourite design shown in figure 5 is "stem", a simple organic leaf motif created in 2001, which is now on a wide range of surfaces including wallpapers, homeware and clothes.



Figure 5: Kiely's 'stems' pattern (Kiely 2018)

Her business collapsed in 2022 due to financial problems following opening a new shop in New York. However, her online business continues to supply a range of products including bags, accessories and homeware. She is keen to protect the environment working to reduce waste and use reusable/recycled materials for her products and packaging. The skills she needed to overcome the financial problems and keep her business successful show the resilience and passion she had for design and her career. She had to change her approach to marketing and developing a solely online business, which up to today has been successful.

While Rhodes and Kiely both have art-based backgrounds their approaches to design are very different. Rhodes has an individual approach to her designs with each design individual and with her style changing to follow fashion trends. Kiely has kept her original stems design and reinvents it each year using different repeat styles, for example block and half drop. Colour is a big difference between them with Rhodes keeping a bright bold colour palette throughout her career whereas Kiely relies on a more muted colour palette inspired by nature.

Comparing my work with Rhodes and Kiely I am still developing my style as I am early in my career. The inspiration I get is from trips and looking at the work of other artists and designers. I am mostly working on repeat patterns and learning

about the different styles, colour palettes and textures. However, the designs I create are individual like Rhodes but are often repeat patterns with varying colour palettes. I use a variety of processes including hand screen printing, painting, drawing and digital work. The wider the range of techniques I can use the better the design will be as I would have developed initial design to satisfy the design brief or produce a saleable product.

Conclusion:

Most people agree that there is a danger of ignoring the design in mass production because that would be more profitable for their business. The theory of head, heart, hand and humour is the foundation of successful design. This enables the designer to use the range of taught and natural skills needed for surface pattern designs. While the designers referred to all have an art background Cottrell, and the experience of Kiely's business failure show how important the range of skill needed is.

After the Industrial Revolution there was a risk of design skills being lost but this was recognised by people like Morris. Today the risk is from the use of digital design and in the near future artificial intelligence could be the greatest risk to the designer.

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