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Surface Pattern Design

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Research in Context

Question 2.

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

Lecturer – Julia Lockheart

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artist/makers/designers from the lecture series

In this essay I will seek to define the skills required in my role as a surface pattern designer by looking at the stages of design and which skills are required for a successful outcome. I will also be looking at the work of 20th century architect and product designer Dieter Rams and that of 19th century designer Owen Jones. I hope to conclude by finding which skills have predominantly influenced the successfulness of their careers and if they share any similarities.

First, I would like to define the meaning of skill and then start by defining the skills of the designer in my own discipline of Surface pattern design.

The Oxford English dictionary definition of skill is the ability to do something well or possess a particular ability. The first ability a designer should possess is the ability to follow a brief to ascertain the basic requirements of the client. The designer must be able to work out what is necessary to make the project a success using design reasoning. A skilled designer will be able to deduce intuitively or by observing evidence and by employing general principles derived from philosophy or maths. They may also use abduction to form their own theory or estimation.

Although one of the inherent skills of a designer is intuitive empathy, a designer needs to identify who their product is for and what does it need to convey in order to successfully build an empathic connection. "We are consumers of meaning not matter." (Chapman J. 2005 p30)

Designers must possess the ability to understand their customers from the inside out. Once this is established, they can move on to secondary research and the pursuit of artistic inspiration.

In researching and collecting further information, it is important to make continual efforts to understand the connections between people, places or events. If this is skilfully done it will allow the designer to anticipate their course and act effectively.

You must ask yourself questions about the user, probing for more detail.

“The appreciation of a work of art depends upon the capacity of the spectator to project his personality into the object of contemplation.” (Theodore Lipps quoted in Chapman 1912 p.20)

The skill of the pattern designer, after having collected all their information, is the ability to make sense of what they have learned. They will be able to find themes appropriate to the relationships they discovered and apply them to the task in hand.

Chapman says that designers must ensure they weave intricate layers into their products to ensure the sustainability of their meaning.

A skilful designer will use their visual senses to interpret and categorise.

One way to make order out of the chaos of information gathered, is by classification according to type. In this way the designer can create organisation, clarity and sense of continuity.

Ingold said of artists, “they make their way through the task scape as do walkers through the landscape, bringing forth their work as they press on with their own lives. It is in this very forward movement that the creativity of the work is to be found.” (2010 p.97)

Once the ideas are organised the skill of the designer is to Produce a tangible artefact with no visible connection between input and output. Drafting of ideas into artwork is a skill set which may be aided by following formal principles of design,

collected knowledge of colour or by unearthing new or established aspects of culture. In doing so the designer may take an ordinary object and make it into something more meaningful than the actual object itself.



Fig.1 Digital print design – own design



Fig.2 Acrylic artwork – own design

After the draft is complete the pattern designer must be able to identify suitable materials to work with, knowing what effect the processes, in the case of surface pattern this may include dyeing the fabric itself or printing onto a variety of surfaces. If the designer does not have the knowledge or the expertise to make change accordingly, the project will not be a success. It is an important skill that through problem solving you can apply your own practical methods, building knowledge and discovering as you go along,

In a period of climate crisis, we may also want to ask ourselves, are my methods ecologically sound? Will the product be long lasting?

Chapman urges us that “when planning product lifespan, consider the material from which the product will be made, too durable (in the case of plastics and resins) and the materials will grossly outlive our desire for them”. (2005 p.27)

One designer who is acutely aware of the ecological effects of design on the environment is Dieter Rams, a successful designer in the field of architecture and product design, whose design skills have influenced designers around the world.

As a designer he was concerned about the state of the world with regard to the confusion of form and colour. He was able to deduce the need for purity and clean lines in his products and tried to bring peace and clarity to his designs, in order to reclaim our surroundings.

He began by questioning his own contributions and whether they were good enough.

His work was greatly influenced by Japanese design and culture, the belief that the objects people live with represent the owner's personality. His ability to empathise with the Japanese culture would influence the direction of his design thinking.

In the words of De Wong “In the present era where many certainties have become less certain and design has become democratised and sometimes vulgar, the work of Rams is an oasis of calm.” (2017 p.32)

Rams knows the real value of design by continuous dialogue with the people who use the products he designs. He does not design for purely fashionable reasons or to draw attention to himself.

He believes that design begins with consideration and uses his empathic skills to engage with the population's traditions in order to utilize them for his future design development.

It has become Rams' mission to stem the flow of mindless consumerism in order to protect our environment. As a designer he is able to innovate useful, understated products in an effort to inspire a more contented way of living, encouraging empathy with the object makes the public more likely to buy it, especially if they feel they have a sense of social responsibility.

He believes we should think twice about what we are to produce, and this should be achieved with as little design as possible.

"A thing is defined by its essence. In order to design it so that it functions well – a receptacle, a chair, a house, its essence must first be explored; it should serve its purpose perfectly, that is, fulfil its function practically and be desirable, inexpensive and beautiful." (Gropius W. quoted in De Wong 2017 p.55)

In his role as product designer, his ability to cooperate successfully with research, manufacturing and marketing is essential and at the same time skilfully collaborating with technicians is an absolute necessity and the key to his success as a practitioner.

The ability to synthesise the knowledge he has acquired can be observed in his proposal of the 10 most important principles of design.

He sets out that a good product should be innovative, useful, aesthetic, understandable, unobtrusive being neither decorative nor a work of art. Furthermore, it should be honest, not making false promises, long lasting, thorough down to the last detail, environmentally friendly and achieved with as little design as possible.

As he states, “Less is only more if it is better”.

The products resulting from his work have been proven to enjoy a much longer life than other brands and were not renewed as frequently. Dieter Rams skill as a designer made them user friendly, encouraging emotional attachment to their products.



Fig.3 Dieter Rams – Portable player



Fig. 4 Dieter Rams – Chair programme

The second designer I wish observe is Owen Jones. Although he was a designer across many disciplines, he is best remembered for his book The Grammar of Ornament.

Published in 1856 his book contained multiple examples of patterns from around the world and a series of propositions that categorized collective principles of design under the term of nature.

It was a multicultural text that attempted to synthesise the industrial culture of the period through general principles of design.

Britain was witnessing the emergence of a new culture in politics, art and design. An attitude of openness and curiosity.

It was an era in which the importance of colour in combination with form was less strong, the predominant architectural style was neo classical and so colour was considered less important and largely ignored, designers giving more importance to form.

At this time Jones was a successful interior designer, in which he realised the importance of colour and space. He believed that form without colour is like a body without a soul.

He saw a lack of integrity between style and culture and that a lack of recognition that science and industry was now the prevailing spirit of 19th century British culture. Designs suited particularly for the machine were the salvation of modern design, instead of natural images, pertaining to be three dimensional on a two-dimensional surface, which were popular at the time.

Owen Jones was one of the first to take the initiative in architectural and product design with a revolutionary theory on colour and design, the result of his research in art and civilisations on his grand tour to the Middle east, the Mediterranean and western Europe.

His skill as a designer allowed him to collect and catalogue information from different cultures and different centuries.

He was particularly influenced by the Moorish style of medieval Spain, who believed in the idea of decoration of an integrated architectural design and not the idea of decoration as a basis for architectural composition. Their religion forbids the depiction of realistic motifs or scenes, so their main focus was geometric patterns.



Fig.5 Owen Jones – Moresque no.5

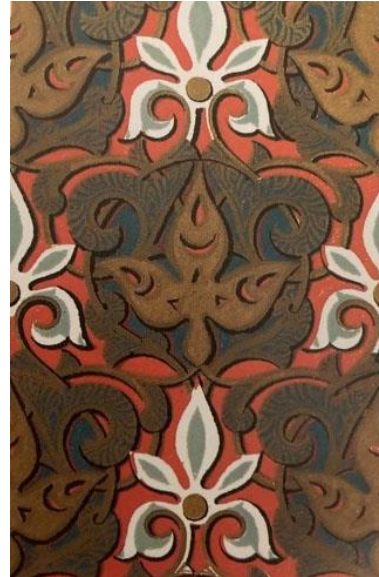


Fig.6 Owen Jones – Moresque no.3

“Practitioners I contend, are wanderers, wayfarers, who’s skill lies in their ability to find the grain of the world’s becoming and to follow it’s course while bending it to their evolving purpose.” (Ingold T. 2010 p.92)

He had skilfully deduced that primary colours had been used during the greatest periods of art and could be adopted using scientifically measured proportions. His appreciation of the Islamic colours and designs led to his attempts to publish the results of his research over the course of ten years.

The skill Owen Jones possesses in the classification of knowledge acquired can be observed in the development of his book *The Grammar of Ornament*. It Consists of

20 chapters, organised geographically and chronologically. Multiple examples of ornament drawn from actual architecture, ceramics, tiles, stained glass and other applied arts, which could be widely used for a range of media.

It became a vocabulary for new industrial culture in search of a modern style.

As Flusser states Bourgeoise culture had made a distinct division between the arts and the machine, but at the end of the 19th century “*design* more or less indicated the site where art and technology come together as equals, making a new culture possible.” (1999. p19)

He was also able to condense his ideas into a series of 37 propositions calling for unity of basic design principles across culture, using the past as a guide to find the true path. According to these principles the best periods of ornament were based on the observation of the principles of the forms of nature rather than an attempt to imitate the absolute form, true art consisting in idealising and not copying the forms of nature. In his own words “The more closely nature is copied, the farther we are removed from producing a work of art.” (Owen J. 1856 p.154)

His expertise in colour and design had a major influence on his commissions, promoting the preference for geometrically arranged flat patterns.

Evidence of his skill as a designer can be seen in his influence in many architectural endeavours of the time, such as the Chrystal Palace and a series of tiles in 1851 secured his reputation as a colourist.

The appreciation of his ability is evident in his range of influence, such as William Morris and Frank Lloyd Wright, on future generations, and that his book “The Grammar of Ornament is still in print today.

As general rule I conclude that all designers possess a universal skill set. They instinctively use their visual senses to interpret the world around them, using intuitive powers of deduction they can make sense of connections between people and places or discover what is hidden from the average onlooker.

A designer may possess intuitive empathy or be able to attune themselves to their connection between people or places. The skill of the designer will be to make sense of the knowledge they have acquired and synthesise it within their disciplines.

Despite the divide of history, I find similarities in the skills exhibited by Dieter Rams and Owen Jones. Rams possesses an acute awareness of how good aesthetics impact our surroundings, as does Jones a century earlier. Both designers are greatly influenced by the culture of other lands and are skilled in infusing the essence of it into their designs and design theories. In both cases their ability to catalogue and classify have allowed them to produce the 10 principles of good design and the 37 propositions respectively. Due to the depth of their skills, they have both become a great influence on current and future designers.

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IMAGES

Fig.1 Own work (2021) UWTSD

Fig.2 Own work (2019) Furreverandever.com

Fig.3 De Wong C.W. (2017) *Ten Principles for Good Design: Dieter Rams*. Prestel, Munich

Fig.4 De Wong C.W. (2017) *Ten Principles for Good Design: Dieter Rams*. Prestel, Munich

Fig.5 Jones O. (1856) *The Grammar of Ornament*. Studio Editions, London

Fig.6 Jones O. (1856) *The Grammar of Ornament*. Studio Editions, London

