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Programme of Study: Surface Pattern & Textiles Module: ADAD5004 Research in Practice

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Word Count: 2650

Crafts – Heritage – Folklore

Throughout this research essay, I will explore the three keywords: *Crafts*, *Heritage*, and *Folklore*. I will examine the importance of crafts and their risk of endangerment; how heritage provides a sense of our origins; and folklore, which brings to life the myths and customs that shape our identity. By investigating each of these elements individually, this essay aims to establish a foundation for my dissertation proposal by connecting these concepts to understand their significance within the field of art and design.

Crafts

Crafts encompass a variety of skilled activities or processes of constructing and creating objects, typically by hand, using various tools and techniques. “Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking” (Sennett, 2008, p. 22), a process that demonstrates how craft embodies both technical skill and intellectual engagement. Crafts also reflect cultural significance and artistic expression, illustrating

their multifaceted nature in historical and contemporary contexts and are often appreciated for their uniqueness and creativity. Examples of crafts include woodworking, ceramics and pottery (Fig. 1), metalworking- such as jewellery making and blacksmithing, textile-related crafts which include knitting, weaving, and hand embroidery, and folk and traditional crafts which use traditional practices and techniques passed down through generations to create culturally specific objects (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 Sam Marks clay throwing, 2022.



Fig 2. Patrick Amos carves a Totem Pole, 2021.

Some of the earliest forms of craftsmanship date back to the Palaeolithic period, including stone and bone tools. These tools were shaped using a technique known as 'knapping', which involves repeatedly striking the material to create a sharp point (Dilley, 2020). These tools would have played a crucial role in hunting, but were also used to carve abstract images into stone.

Ever since 'modern people' first inhabited Western Europe, they utilized, carved, and engraved everyday tools and weapons and similarly modified the surfaces of the places they inhabited, sometimes adding spectacular paintings, engravings, and sculptures to the walls and ceilings (Lawson, 2012, p.3).

In his book '*Painted Caves: Palaeolithic Rock Art in Western Europe*', Lawson (2012) discusses the possible meanings behind the images from ethnographic studies that suggest the animals represented, were primarily large herbivores believed to be 'desirable' as a food resource for hunter-gatherers (Fig. 3). Conversely, there is a possibility that it was a type of Palaeolithic art in which social groups identified themselves as a specific animal, making the symbols fundamentally totemic. This suggests that crafts not only supply us with the tools and objects necessary for survival but also serve as a means of cultural expression and self-identity.



Fig. 3 Sculpted rock face: figure of a horse. La Chaire-à-Calvin, France. 2012.

As cultures and societies evolve, their crafts also change. Unfortunately, this evolution can lead to the loss or endangerment of certain crafts and skills.

This endangerment can be observed in relation to Vardo art (Fig. 4), which refers to the style of painting on a vardo, the Romany word for wagon. Vardos commonly feature carvings of

horses, horseshoes, bunches of grapes, vine leaves, flowers, small birds, and animal heads. These designs symbolise the deep connection between the community and their means of livelihood and home. The motifs represent themes of life, fertility, and growth, reflecting the identity and spirit of travelling communities (Fox, 2022).

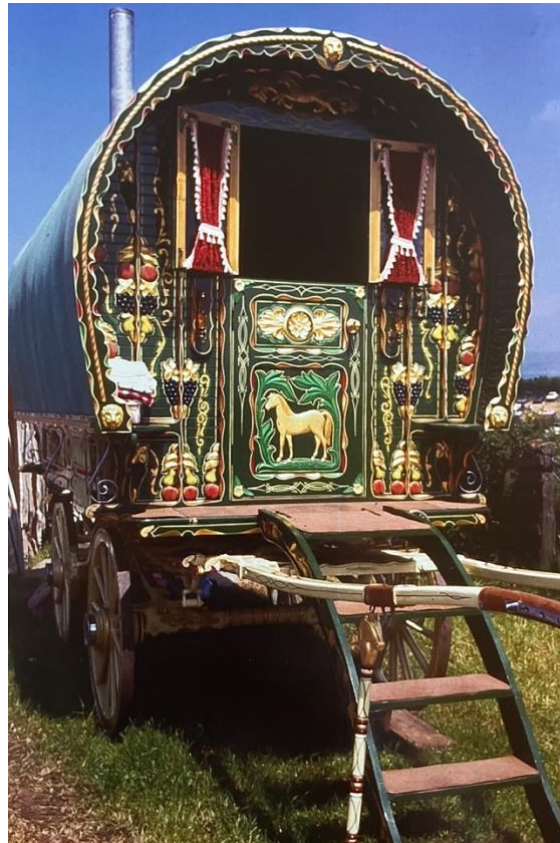


Fig. 4 Painted Vardo (Baxter, 2010, p. 65).

As of March 2023, there are only eighteen skilled crafts practitioners in the UK actively engaged in traditional vardo and heritage wagon building, restoration, and painting; as the post-war era saw an increase of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) families move into permanent brick social housing. From the 1940s to the 2020s, traditional horse-drawn vardo living declined in favour of modern trailers and static chalets on private sites. Furthermore,

the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill of 2022 (PCSCB) has made roadside living illegal in the UK (Heritage Crafts, 2025).

The endangerment of traditional crafts and skills within minority cultures, such as the GRT community, represents a significant cultural loss. These practices are linked to identity and ways of life that have continued for generations. As these communities face marginalisation and cultural assimilation, their knowledge and artistic expression are at risk of disappearing. This loss affects not only the communities themselves but also the world, as we lose valuable, diverse perspectives and the richness of lived experiences. Preserving these skills reflects cultural respect and resilience, ensuring that minority voices and their creative legacies continue to enrich global heritage.

Heritage

Heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible elements inherited from previous generations, preserved in the present, and passed down to future generations. This includes languages, traditions, monuments, artefacts, customs, and various forms of artistic expression. Heritage shapes individual and collective identity, reflecting shared cultural narratives and values. It serves as a way for societies to remember their history and envision their future (Margolis, 2025).

Intangible heritage:

Includes all immaterial elements that are considered by a given community as essential components of its intrinsic identity as well as of its uniqueness and distinctiveness in comparison with all other human groups. (Lenzerini, 2011, p. 102).

An example of intangible heritage is the Sun Dance- known natively as *Wiwanyag Wacipi*. A sacred ritual practised by many Native American tribes, including the Lakota (Fig. 5), Cheyenne, Sioux, Shoshone, and Blackfoot tribes. Typically practised on the day of the summer solstice, and lasting between four and eight days, the ceremony involves a physical and spiritual test of pain and sacrifice, primarily performed by the male tribe members as a rite of passage into manhood (Hufford, 2023). This ceremony is culturally symbolic to Native American tribes, and one that is still practised by the Lakota.



Fig. 5 Lakota Sun Dance, 1970.



Fig. 6 Stonehenge, England. 2022.

Intangible heritage is how a specific culture defines its identity based on impalpable elements that have evolved over time. In contrast, tangible heritage refers to objects, monuments, structures, and sites that hold cultural and historical significance. For example, the prehistoric megalithic monument of Stonehenge, a UNESCO World Heritage

site located in Wiltshire, England (Fig. 6). Dated at around 3000 BC, Stonehenge's initial construction was an excavated circular ditch upon sacred ground that became the burial site for the cremated remains of 150-200 Welsh individuals (The British Museum, 2025). The reasons behind the construction of Stonehenge remain uncertain. Building the monument spanned over a millennium, and primary research suggests it could have served various purposes: a sacred site for Druids, an astrological observatory, or even a healing centre; as the bluestones from west Wales which form part of the monument, may have been believed to possess magical properties, due to their impressive relocation over a distance of 145 miles. Recent research by English archaeologist Mike Parker Pearson suggests that Stonehenge was likely a centre for ancestor worship. It is connected by the river Avon to two ceremonial avenues leading to a corresponding wooden circle at Durrington Walls, near Salisbury (Owens, 2025). Today, Stonehenge is a popular ceremonial site for modern Pagans and Druids who come to celebrate both the summer and winter solstices. This is primarily due to the astrological alignments of the stones and how the sun interacts with the monument on these specific dates. It also serves as a sacred landmark for religions to honour their Celtic traditions.

Attracting over 1 million visitors a year, Stonehenge remains one of Britain's most popular monument sites (Jones, 2024). Financial reports highlight the running costs of the English Heritage-owned landmark, which averaged at approximately £2.5 million and a profit of £4.5 million from 2010-2011 (Pitts, 2011). While this profit allows for the ongoing maintenance of such a revered site, unfortunately, other World Heritage landmarks, such as the Ancient City of Damascus (Fig. 7), are on the 'World Heritage in Danger' list (UNESCO, 2013).



Fig. 7 Merchants outside Umayyad Mosque, Damascus. 2010.

The Ancient City of Damascus, once renowned for its opulent fabrics and valuable trading position along the Silk Road, has been significantly endangered due to the ongoing civil war in Syria. According to Otero (2021), several factors threaten the preservation of heritage sites, including inadequate environmental conditions, climate change, the overwhelming impact of tourism, and insufficient management and resources. These issues are now recognised as major conservation threats to World Heritage Sites.

In addition to the challenges encountered by tangible heritage, intangible heritage also faces concerns. For instance, the discourse surrounding 'cultural theft' by Western society regarding its appropriation of another culture. "Cultural appropriation is copying from or misrepresenting another culture and capitalising off it" (Tooper, 2022). This emphasises the difficulties cultures encounter in preserving the ownership and authenticity of their heritage. Furthermore, it is often marginalised societies that endure these challenges. On

one hand, they experience racism and discrimination, while their intangible heritage is admired, yet often appropriated and diluted by Western culture.

While researching my own heritage, which is of Gypsy/Traveller origin, the family discourse regarding prejudice towards the community was prominent. Stereotypes surrounding the community have been problematic for many traveller families. “In the 1970’s, there were around five gypsy traveller families living alongside us on Fairwood Common” (Fig. 8; Western Mail Archive; Family Member, 2025). The term ‘Gypsy’ can evoke a sense of mysticism, often associated with notions of fortune tellers and nomadic lifestyles. However, it is also considered an offensive term outside of the community and is frequently accompanied by derogatory labels such as “Pikey” and “Tinker.” This creates a hostile divide between settled native communities and those who “pass through.”

We all experienced awful bullying outside of the community. People thought we were dirty and untrustworthy, which I couldn’t understand because we were kind and peaceful people who kept everything clean. (Family Member, 2025).

Given the discrimination and segregation they faced, my family seized the opportunity for social housing in the Swansea area of Wales and made the decision to conceal their heritage to better integrate into the community.



Fig. 8 Campsite at Fairwood Common, Swansea. 1974.

While concealing one's culture may serve as a means of self-preservation in an oppressive society, preserving cultural heritage is vital to maintaining a community's identity, values, and traditions. Embracing one's culture, even in the face of discrimination, is a profound act of resilience and self-affirmation. This commitment challenges stereotypes and promotes greater understanding and respect among diverse communities. By holding onto their heritage, individuals honour their roots and play a crucial role in fostering a more inclusive and empathetic society.

Folklore

The term *Folklore*, introduced by William Thoms in 1846 to replace the earlier phrase “popular antiquities”, is a vital aspect of culture that helps communities establish their identity and shared beliefs through storytelling, dance, and artistic expression (Winick, 2014). At a time when many people were illiterate, the stories and myths of cultures were passed down orally from one generation to the next. They provided a valuable approach to teaching and sharing informal knowledge about individuals and the world around them. However, this mode of communication altered or exaggerated the narrative over time, resulting in cautionary tales developing into elaborate fairy tales, such as *Little Red Riding Hood* (Fig. 9).

Durham University anthropologist, Jamie Tehrani, analysed the origins of the European fairy tale, which was traditionally attributed to Charles Perrault in the 17th century, and revealed that it has ancient origins. These origins can be traced back to an 11th-century Belgian poem about a local peasant girl who wears a red baptismal tunic and wanders off to encounter a wolf, thereby highlighting its roots in folklore (Hartigan, 2013).

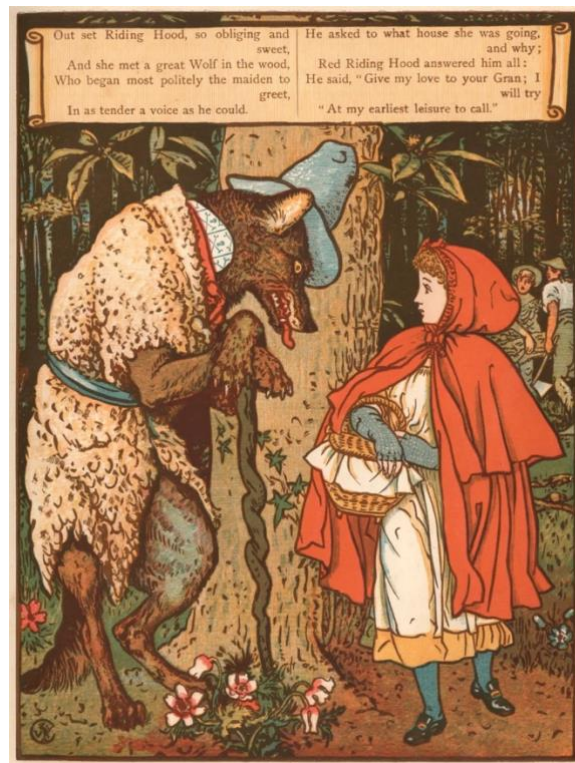


Fig. 9 'And she met a great Wolf in the wood...', 1879.

Little Red Riding Hood and other fairy tales and fables serve a metaphorical and symbolic purpose. They are primarily intended to protect children from dangerous situations while also providing moral guidance. "For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination" (Bettelheim, 2010, pp. 9-10). This suggests that for a child to grasp the fundamental meaning behind a story, its delivery must be exaggerated and unrealistic.

Little Red Riding Hood is a story about a young girl sent by her mother to deliver food to her grandmother. She encounters a wolf who tricks her. The wolf then races ahead to eat her grandmother. Disguised in the grandmother's clothing, the wolf intends to eat Little Red

Riding Hood when she arrives. She realises this, and a nearby huntsman comes to her rescue and kills the wolf, saving both the girl and her grandmother.

In summary, the story's moral teaches children to be wary of strangers and listen to their parents. However, on a more complex level, through its symbolic depictions and multi-metaphorical use of character representation, the wolf represents an untrustworthy, animalistic man and the dangers that surround women. Although these themes have now been removed from the story to ensure it remains appropriate for children, Charles Perrault's version of the fairy tale contains undertones of sexual coercion, which concludes with a moral that states, "We learn that teenagers, especially those good-looking, fancy girls, should not listen to certain people and should not be surprised by the joke about the wolf that eats so many unsuspecting victims." (Perrault 2020 p. 19). This reinforces the findings of myth and folklore scholars, Maria Tatar and Cristina Bacchilega, who located earlier versions of the tale passed down from women to girls to prepare them for adulthood, describing it as an "initiator tale" for young women (Gouri, 2017).

Although these tales have been crafted over centuries, their messages still remain relevant. They highlight the obstacles we face throughout life and illustrate the possible outcomes of our decisions if we fail to choose wisely. While folklore is often seen as a relic of the past, it continues to exist and evolve in contemporary forms. An example of this would be "digital folklore," which illustrates the transition from oral storytelling to the vast realm of technology, particularly the internet.

Online creations such as *Slender Man* (Fig. 10), a fictional internet character created in 2009 by Eric Knudsen, a *Something Awful* forum user, describe an unusually tall, featureless, shadowy figure said to stalk and abduct people, primarily children (Byrne, 2024). Digitally

created images depict *Slender Man* as a haunting supernatural figure lurking in the shadows, and the online lore generated around its origins weaves a believable narrative that attracts and influences younger generations.



Fig.10 Slender Man, 2009.

An article released by *The Independent* in 2014 stated that the brutal stabbing of a 12-year-old girl in Wisconsin was carried out by two of her classmates as they wanted to please the mythological character, due to becoming obsessed with it in the months leading up to the attack (Orr, 2014). *Slender Man* is an example of how folklore functions as a form of performative prediction and how constructed narratives accumulate over time, shaping beliefs and behaviours to the extent that the imagined threat acquires a cultural reality, manifesting as a self-fulfilling prophecy entirely crafted from story.

My exploration of the keywords *Crafts*, *Heritage*, and *Folklore* reveals the intricate ways in which traditions are preserved, practised, and interpreted. Crafts serve as forms of knowledge, deeply rooted in manual skill and material engagement. The image of the totem carver, for instance, illustrates how crafts become both an act of symbolic making and cultural storytelling. Heritage shapes our understanding of cultural remembrance, seen in how sites like Stonehenge are curated, interpreted, and invested with meaning across generations. Folklore emerges as a particularly influential, yet potentially problematic tool in this context. Often celebrated for its role in preserving cultural identity, folklore can also perpetuate outdated narratives such as that of *Little Red Riding Hood*. It can also be used to reinforce social hierarchies and romanticise the past in ways that obstruct progress and inclusivity.

While each keyword defines different forms of cultural expression, folklore resonates most deeply with my research interests, particularly its ability to carry cultural memory while also raising questions about who controls those narratives and how they evolve. This places folklore as the most compelling topic for further investigation and the basis for my proposed dissertation enquiry: *“To what extent does folklore serve as both a tool for cultural preservation and a means of reinforcing exclusion or perpetuating harmful ideologies?”* This question encourages us to take a closer look at the stories we pass down and to consider whether folklore keeps cultures alive or holds them back.

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