

# Research in Practice

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**Keywords:**

Personality, Time, Theatre

**Artists:**

William Morris, Su Blackwell, Ken Briggs

**Introduction**

The aim of this essay is to explore my chosen keywords, images and artists to propose a question for my independent inquiry. Firstly, I am interested in the idea of tracing **personality** within design work as it is interesting to see unique influences and style, and the see the artist's and brand's journey through their work.

I chose **time** as my next keyword because I wanted to explore nostalgia within design, traditional design techniques and timeless pieces of art. I decided that **'time'** as a keyword was a good way to bring these elements into my research. Finally, I chose **theatre** as my final keyword because I always liked the experience of **theatre** and I noticed the broadness of design involved in **theatre**, including costume and set design, as well as advertising materials and how they are all interlinked.

**Personality**

This section will explore the concept of **personality** within the artistic context. This will include looking at how brands and designers showcase their **personality** through their designs. Humans have a tendency to inject their own **personality** into their works.

Walter (2011) points out that even mechanical items can have some of the maker's **personality** injected into them. For example, the original typefaces used with the printing press made by Gutenberg was formed to imitate a calligraphic style of handwriting, making the presentation human-like.

A more modern example is web design, where the creators design unique looking sites. To reach the target audience, web designers must research tastes of the target audience, and plan and create around their motivations and attitudes. Part of this research and planning involves creating personas about the people who represent their target group to help keep the design focused to their needs. By understanding the interests and influences of the target audience, designers can tailor their website to match the **personality** of the main users of the site. This injects the **personalities** and tastes of many people, rather than the designers themselves. This helps the designers create better design solutions with a focus on the people who use their site and create an emotional connection through the design **personality**.

When thinking about brand design, the designers should think about how the brand should be portrayed. Branding design for a brand that is serious and business-like would look different to a brand that is quirky and fun. The **personality** of the brand needs to be represented in the design.

**Personalities** usually adjust for the context. For example, we behave differently in a job interview to how we behave amongst friends. These **personality** shifts must also take place in our designs in order to meet the needs of the project, the audience and the client. Walter (2011) suggests that we think of designs as people, to create designs with **personalities** that the target audience would want to engage with and leave a lasting impression.

When it comes to the **personality** of the brand and the **personality** of the designer, it is not possible to please everyone. "Personality is a risk, but there are many real-world examples that suggest the rewards are worth it" (Walter, 2011). A strong **personality** can clash with some audiences, but this can ensure that the right people who understand and appreciate the brand are the ones using it, thereby avoiding potential customer relations issues.



*Figure 1: Strawberry Thief ,William Morris (1883)*

William Morris was a distinguished interior, pattern and product designer. His distinct style hints at, and represents his **personality** in some ways. Morris (1834-1896) became renowned for his repeated pattern designs inspired by British wildlife. His passion for the local flora and fauna and “deep love of all things natural” (V&A, 2009, p.5) contrasted the fashionable exotic flower patterns popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. His ‘Strawberry Thief’ (figure 1) design is a popular repeated pattern for textiles. The pattern stands out for its intricate detail, but it also has nostalgic value for me as this pattern was present in my family home. The pattern showcases his preference for British wildlife but also for dark colours that are traditional whilst being bold and colourful at the same time.

Morris considered all aspects of the design not just visual aesthetics. He researched a study of how things were made, different techniques pattern formation and mathematic methods of systems of repeat (V&A, 2009). This created patterns in his designs that flowed and worked smoothly, not appearing in blocks but continuing to intertwine and connect. This reflects the precision, logical and meticulous thinker he must have been, conveying an organised, clever, well-educated person. These are all assumptions or an educated guess

that could be made from information published about Morris. This highlights the importance of how design can convey **personality**, and manipulate what people think of designers and brands **personalities**. **Personalities** are interpreted from designs as they are perceived, judged and understood by the audience.

## **Time**

The concept of **time** makes me think of nostalgia and timelessness. How pieces of design can be reminiscent and give the feeling of a certain period of **time**, as well as how designs had stood the test of **time**. Traditional techniques which may not be as popular as they once were, are being adapted to modern ways of working such as collaborating with digital tools, this has given them a new lease of life, creating a nostalgia to their origins and seeing if the skills can be timeless.

One traditional design technique that is timeless is the art of papercutting. Papercutting is a minimal yet highly decorative art in which negative space is created to form elaborate designs (Avella, 2011). A craft with such a clean modern style has an incredible history, originating from China. The oldest paper cut that still exists is from the sixth century. Before the creation of paper, a similar technique was used, cutting images into bark and leather.

First used to decorate doors and windows these designs often featured animals, flowers, landscapes, everyday scenes and historical figures. Papercutting became an art in its own right after it had spread further through Asia to Japan, where it took off in the Edo period. This period nurtured traditions of Japanese art such as calligraphy, textiles, painting, ceramics and architecture (Guth, 2010).



*Figure 2: Papercut Shiviti (19th Century)*

The art continued to spread through the Middle East and into Europe mainly by the transportation of religious documents that were decorated with paper cuttings. Monks taught and used paper cutting, however some religions used the technique more than others, such as Muslim and Jewish communities. Figure 2 is an example of this, the Shiviti was a decorative plaque found in synagogues, Figure 2 pictures Psalm 67 cut in gold and coloured paper. Once papercutting became more mainstream it also had strong ties with easter traditions, where walls of cottages would be decorated by families easter themed designs (Avella, 2011).



*Figure 3: Hannah More (paper cut with wash), Augustin Edouart (1827)*

Papercutting is an example of how design techniques stand the test of **time**, is it is an artform that has come in and out of fashion several times. For example, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it became a popular hobby to create silhouette portraits (Figure 3). Not only was this a fashionable pastime but was a paid profession, people would sit for professional cutters and pay for silhouettes of themselves and their family. However, when photography became mainstream the simple cuttings were swapped for the more realistic and exciting photograph. Papercutting now has adapted to the modern digital world with artists selling their work online and creating templates to publish online. The simple elegance of it seems to attract lots of artists who believe “cutting can create an effect that paint or pencils can in no way emulate” (Avella, 2011, p.12). Paper cuttings can be seen incorporated to all sorts of modern design from large installations, greetings cards, book covers, and the effect being recreated digitally. This shows how this traditional technique has adapted to meet the needs of modern times, whilst still maintaining the original process.



*Figure 4: Page from Into the Dark Woods, Su Blackwell (2021)*



Figure 5: British Airways Campaign, Su Blackwell (2012)

Su Blackwell is a paper cutting artist, she has been creating since 2003 and is most known for altering books to create artwork (Heyenga, 2011). She has been commissioned to create book covers, pieces for editorials and magazines, set designs, advertisements and exhibition pieces. Most of her early work was based on fairy tales. She delicately cuts out mystical scenes from books which adds another dimension to the story showing a darker side. She even created her own fairy tale *Into the Dark Woods* (Figure 4) where she retold classic, stories but gave them an unseen darker twist than before (Su Blackwell Studio). In the artwork (Figure 4), Blackwell has created a forest from the book's pages, she has used depth and perspective to really draw in the audience and provide the backdrop for the scene. She has then added a paper model and character telling the story, which is photographed to create the imagery for the book. She also made an accompanying book giving instructions on how to make some of the paper cuttings seen in the book.

In 2012 (Figure 5) and again in 2015 she worked on campaigns for British Airways (Su Blackwell Studio). She used photos of paper cut books and passports to create travel scenes. These are particularly eye catching as most advertisements are highly digital, whereas these have embraced the traditional handmade technique with a modern-day twist. Figure 5 is more exciting and engaging due to the technique, differentiating it from other adverts. This new way of working using photographs of cuttings to create images and to retell classic stories, shows how this technique is being used now compared to hundreds of years ago. Although paper cutting was traditionally used in religious books and to tell stories, Blackwell has adapted the technique and created her own style and method by using more modern tools and ideas to create her artwork.

## Theatre

This keyword research will focus on advertising for **theatre**, one of the best examples in the UK is the National Theatre. An example from another part of the world would be Paula Scher and her work for the Public Theatre in New York. Both examples focus on the **theatre's** identities, as well as graphics used in advertising and print.

National Theatre in London has produced more than 1700 posters. These have all been made under the direction of five graphic designers from 1963 till today. National Theatre was first founded in 1963, with its opening performance being *Hamlet*. The theatre and play were under the direction of Laurence Olivier who led the company from its beginning until 1976 (National Theatre, 2022).

The posters created for each one of the 800 plays were used to promote and provide the play with visual expression (Poynor, 2017). The posters created, show and represent the style, skills and approaches of the different designers who created them, however there is a distinct identity used across the posters. The first designer for the National Theatre was Ken Briggs, who was responsible for introducing the design's consistency and coherency. This had a vast positive impact on the theatre business as they are not just works of art but

communication campaigns. This early design consistency was in the form of Swiss style design when Briggs was designing. The grid structures, Helvetica type and use of colour created the theatre's recognisable identity (Poynor, 2017).

Ken Briggs was introduced into graphics after studying Book Design and Production at the Central School of Arts & Crafts. Once leaving education he became a typographer for Everetts advertising agency, however he left after a year to work for the National Trade Press as he was unhappy in his first job (Lamont, 2022). After losing his second job, Briggs took commissions for a variety of clients and started teaching, until he asked to pitch for the National Theatre where he worked for twelve years. Whilst working for the theatre Briggs also signed the *First Things First Manifesto* by Ken Garland.

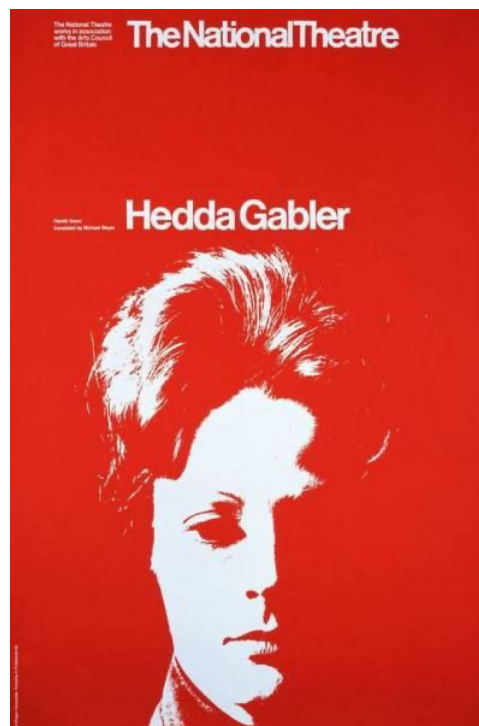


Figure 6: *Hedda Gabler*, Ken Briggs (1970)

Briggs designs feature the Swiss style and striking imagery, this can be seen in Figure 6. The close up of actress Maggie Smith is reminiscent of Brigg's early posters, with the grainy photo with a single colour background, but this time swapping his traditional black background for bright red. Briggs designed an incredible striking poster, therefore it is no surprise that he created a name for the National Theatre's graphic design.



Figure 7: *Edward II*, *As You Like It* and *Home and Beauty* posters, Ken Briggs (1967-68)

Over the theatre's history there have been periods of continuity with very similar style and layout, as can be seen in Figure 7, then later contrasting periods of design that focused more on the play. In these designs, the early ideas for each play's graphic design were a more collaborative event with directors, authors, National Theatre directors, researchers as well as designers (Poynor, 2017). Nonetheless, even when the designs concentrated more on the play, the posters still carried the theatre's identity. The second head of graphics at the theatre, Richard Bird, said that "A **theatre** poster packages the play. It gives it an identity" (Bird cited by Poynor, 2017, p.27) this identity created a name for the theatre, and connects the play, poster, and theatre together without having to give large amounts of detail to the viewer.

It was the opinion of graphic designer Ken Garland that the poster designs were an "integral and enhancing part of the whole **theatre** experience" (Garland cited by Frost, 2006, p.6). He believed the experience of the **theatre** started from first seeing it advertised, to the programs and tickets. Posters are a much larger element of the **theatre** than first glance. The **theatre** has always relied on the strong sense of experience since television became more accessible. Due to this, the **theatre's** creative direction had to adapt to keep up with changing times. Work must be suitable for use in the West End as well as online.

"Advertising and graphics were no longer fixed to a poster" (Poynor, 2017. P.46). These

technological advanced meant that all type and imagery used on posters had to be adaptable for online use.

The National Theatre has evolved its graphics with the **theatre** experience, the way audiences consume the graphics and how they are created, but still celebrates the simplicity and efficiency of the beloved poster.

## Conclusion

This research was intended as an investigation into some areas of interest that can be narrowed down into a research question for next year's dissertation. As a result, I have found I am more interested in including some areas of my research in the proposed question than others. The keyword **personality**, is important to consider how it runs through all art and design and how designers and brands express their **personality**. However, although I enjoyed exploring this, I personally preferred researching techniques and physical designs more.

I wanted to research the word '**time**' to investigate the idea of timeless design, nostalgia, and traditional design techniques. I intended to look at the nostalgia of photo albums and look deeper into the timelessness of some logos and typefaces, but the research led me to the timeless art of papercutting as my focus for this keyword. This was an unintentional topic but has generated an interest in this art form and I would like to develop this further with my own paper cutting designs.

The third keyword was intended to blend some of the research from the first two keywords to see how **personality** and timeless design are applied to the **theatre**, especially posters. National Theatre provides a good example of the importance of posters for the **theatre**. The company created a strong identity and style which has led to many people buying prints of posters. This shows the longevity of the posters, which is down to adapting to the times as well as using **time**-honoured styles that are still in use today.

**Proposed question:**

My proposed question focuses on theatre and timeless design:

*Branding for theatres: How can designers create an effective identity using handmade techniques for a theatre company?*

For the practical side of my work, I am interested in designing posters and design elements for theatre but I am also keen on developing my paper cutting skills so I would like to experiment with this as part of my practice. I enjoy exploring timeless styles so I will try to keep to this aesthetic in my practical work.

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