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The Materiality of Surface

Pattern, texture, and form constitute to one of the most sophisticated languages spoken to date. Transcending time, generations, and spoken language, narrating stories, and sending messages. Far from a mere decorative afterthought, pattern acts as a dynamic media through which communities are enabled to articulate identity, encoding social values, and leaving their mark on their landscape. From woven textile traditions encompassing generations to architectural geometries shaping civic spaces, surfaces have become a way to transmit meaning through material. Speaking where words cannot. Providing a system for humans to communicate with one another throughout time, and across culture.

In contemporary practice, the study of surface pattern offers crucial insight into how cultural symbolism is produced, circulated, and understood. This essay explores how patterns, texture, form and surface, function as a culturally embedded media of communication by drawing upon historical and contemporary contexts in addition to

theoretical frameworks such as semiotics and Gestalt psychology. Through analysing three case studies: Ghanaian Kente cloth, Japanese kimono motifs, and Islamic geometric ornament- indulging in the diverse range of cultural contexts. This essay demonstrates how patterns operate as embodied archives of cultural symbolism, along with reflections of my own practice as a surface pattern designer. Demonstrating that pattern is merely an aesthetical necessity, but a carrier of place, memory, identity- a complex visual language.

To understand pattern communicatively, it is necessary to clarify several key terms. *Pattern* refers to rhythmic arrangements of motifs; *texture* denotes the tactile or physical visual surface qualities of materials; and form encompasses the structural or spatial placement of the motifs. Within material culture studies, these elements are understood not as passive ornaments, but as demonstration of social and cultural or symbolic meaning implanted in the processes of making and use.

In semiotic terminology, a pattern can be described as a structural arrangement of visual cues that operate within a broad symbolic system of meanings. Rather than functioning exclusively as a decorative rhythmic form, but as a signifying structure. Through a combination of a carefully placed composition of motifs, texture, colour, and spatial organisation, they convey meaning of culturally conditioned systems of interpretation “*the sign is arbitrary: it is the cultural code which determines the relationship between signifier and signified*” (Barthes, 1972, p. 112). Therefore, functioning as a system of signifiers, using motif, colour, texture, and rhythmic placement to understand significance that has been shaped with cultural knowledge, rather than solely visual form.

Though from the perspective of Charles. S Peirce, a pattern can simultaneously function as an icon, a symbol as well as an index. As an icon, through its physical recognisable forms, as an index, directing to its environmental or geographical origins, such as region-based materials and fibers, or craftsmanship relative to a certain location or time. Although as a symbol, it gains meaning through social interaction and learnt conventions (Peirce, 1998). Peirce's interpretation of semiology emphasises that the meaning of a patterned surface is not inherent to solely a motif, but arises through the interpretive process, "*A sign is something which stands to somebody for something*" (Peirce, 1998, p. 4). making pattern a dynamic semiotic rather than a static visual aesthetic. Extending on this using Roland Barthes' terminology of denotation, connotation and myth, a pattern's identity lies at a denotative level through its visible properties. Whereas at the connotative level, its culturally embedded values, ideologies, and histories. By understanding that "*myth is a type of speech*" (Barthes, 1972, p. 109) patterns can function as ideological expressions. By naturalising cultural narratives through their visuals and through what society deems to be true.

Gestalt psychology adds an essential dimension to understanding how patterns communicate. Gestalt Theory suggests that perception is structured: "*the whole is different from the sum of its parts*" (Wertheimer, 1923, p. 301). Developed by Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler, this principle helps to explain why surface pattern can be so cognitively powerful; the repetition, rhythm and structural unity help to enhance perceptual coherence that facilitates recognition, memory, and narrative understanding. Principles such as similarity, continuation, closure and figure ground structure influence how patterns are understood and interpreted geologically

and across cultures. For instance, the organised spacial repetition of geometric motifs in Islamic art produces a perceptual sense of infinity, reinforcing theological interpretations of divine unity. Gestalt Theory provides a cognitive understanding between visual experience and cultural meaning, aiding in explaining why as humans we respond so forcibly to surface pattern.

By bringing both these perspectives together it can be established that a pattern may be defined as a culturally defined arrangement of repeatable motifs with formal rhythms, functioning as a sign-system, communicating through iconic resemblance, indexical material reference and symbolic convention, along with the connotative or mythic process of which society holds as cultural values. Foregrounding pattern as semiotically active medium, cognitively powerful through the structure of it's repetition, enabling identity, environment, and cultural symbolism to be communicated.

Across the globe, pattern, texture, and form all serve distinct roles throughout culture. Although serving as a visual language to all, anchoring identity and place, I have decided to focus on a few countries I feel surface pattern has exceptionally strong hold to culture, history, and society. Throughout many African societies, patterned textiles and surfaces signal lineage and status, whereas in East Asian countries, motif organisation encode seasonal and cosmological cycle, and within an Islamic context, geometric repetition serves as a spiritual and metaphysical ideal. Emphasising surface patterns' capacity to be understood narratively, condensed into recognisable forms, rather than words.

Using Kente cloth as my first case study, I aim to expand on the argument that pattern can act as a medium for identity, place, social structure, and historical narrative.

Traditionally woven by Asante and Ewe communities, Kente cloth patterns “ntoma” are composed of interwoven strips of highly structured colour and motif organisation. These designs are not intentional as decorative abstractions of design but as “*a visual metaphor for social values and political histories*” (Ross. D, 1998, pg. 12)



Figure 1.

Often carrying proverbs, Kente patterns reflect the Akan tradition of conveying wisdom through metaphors. As an example, the pattern “Adwinasa” symbolises technical mastery in creativity. Another example is “sika Futuro” communicating wealth and social prestige, linking directly the Barthe’s concept of myth as a “*second order semiological system*” (Barthes.R, 1972, p, 115). The pattern being the signifier, the proverb being the signified, and together forming a culturally specific mythic narrative to be understood visually. In

addition, the tactile quality of the woven strips provides a physical manifestation of interconnectivity, mirroring social cohesion. Gell's theory argues that people treat certain artefacts as if they possess agency due to the objects embodying the intentions, skill, labour, or presence of others. This is highlighted as the labour and dedication embedded into the complexity of weaving become "*indexes of the maker's agency*" (Gell. A, 1998, p, 23) adhering prestige and abundance onto the wearer and maker alike.

The Gestalt theories principles help to explain the perceptual dedication of Kente cloths. By repeating geometric shape and colour utilises similarity, the horizontal stripes relay continuation, rhythmically guiding the eye across the piece. This perceptual structure reinforces the cultural theme of unity-in-multiplicity, aligning visual form with Akan cosmology.

My second case study focuses on the specific motif design and placement on Japanese Kimono patterns. Motifs such as chrysanthemums, cranes, pine, plum, and wave forms all have symbolic associations deeply embedded in Japanese culture, "*the kimono is a repository of encoded messages*" (Dalby. L, 2001, p, 85) communicating age, marital status, moral compass, and seasonal propriety. Japanese kimono motifs are heavily tied to a Japanese concept called "kisetsu" translating to seasonality. By wearing a chrysanthemum motif in autumn or a plum in early spring situates the wearer in a shared social calendar. Aligning with Ingold's notion of materiality and motif context participating together in "*the temporality of lived experience*" (Ingold. T, 2010, p,13). Emphasising the effect surface pattern, texture and form have on the wearer and maker

alike, producing meaning and a lived in experience of said pattern rather than a mere motif.



These carefully thought out surface placements reference classical Buddhist iconography, therefore serving as a “textile text” (Barthes. R, 1983, p, 47) of which the meanings are activated through diverse cultural literacy. Reinforcing the argument that surface pattern design is a complex societal language. Following this, many Kimono patterns feature continuous flowing lines, alongside repeated natural forms, illustrating similarity, continuation, and unity. This helps to produce harmoniously aligned Japanese values such as “*wa*” translating to balance. Referencing Gestalt ‘s theory helps to understand how the surface pattern appears as calm in converse to chaotic, as its perceptual organisation mirrors societies cultural ideals of order and refined restraint.

Figure. 2

My third case study indulges into Islamic geometric patterns, found primarily in Alhambra, mosques, manuscripts, and ceramics, they articulate spiritual concepts through mathematically structured motifs and forms. Burckhardt states that the mathematical Islamic geometry “*reflects the underlying order of*

the universe” (Burckhardt. T, 1976, p, 17) further contributing to the argument of surface pattern and form being cosmological, and merely an aesthetic ornament to be displayed, but a visual expression of metaphysical truths embedded within Islamic view. Geometry becomes a means of communicating structure, harmony, and the infinite repetition of shape mirrors the divine principles of “*tawhīd*” translating to unity, and the interconnectivity of all creation. Reaffirming that form becomes a spiritual language, transforming architectural and material surfaces into meditative environments.

Complementing this, Critchlow argues Islamic pattern serves as a form of “*visual contemplation*” (Critchlow. K, 1976, p, 9) in which the viewer is brought into a reflective state from being drawn into rhythmic repeating pattern and structure, that is believed to encourage reflection on the infinite nature of God. Due to figurative representation being traditionally discouraged in Islamic religion, abstraction becomes the principal means by which artists can convey theological meaning. The extension of patterns repeating, stars multiplying and polygons interlocking, symbolising radiating nature of divine order, evokes a boundless sense that aids in aligning with Qur’anic descriptions of divine infinitude. Leading the viewers' gaze along these paths produces a contemplative state rooted in perceptual immersion. Wertheimer’s claims that the mind seeks “*good form*” (Wertheimer. M, 1923, p, 302) explains how these repeated patterns evoke a perceptual completeness and produce a meditative, coherent visual field even when infinitely repeating.

As a creative practitioner myself, it is imperative that I note my own methods for constructing identity and narrative through material processes; particularly as a surface pattern designer. In my practice, pattern, texture, material, and form make up my every day. Inspired by Ingold's notion of "*process of correspondence*" (Ingold. T, 2010, p, 92) and living through my patterns in an embodied and relational way, my work often draws upon fragments of my own spiritual and symbolic importances. Layered surfaces and complex design collaboratively with considerably thought tonal colour palettes allow me to respond to a memory, a place, or a feeling I want to replicate and communicate with my viewers, turning it into a symbolic dialogue between material, gesture, and conceptual intention. Gestalt principles help guide my composition, in particular continuation, which helps to create perceptual order to increase movement and flow in my designs; evoking a sense of peacefulness and serenity. Resonating with how cultural patterns balance coherence and complexity, I am informed by Gell's emphasis on artefacts as agent mediating social relations, by viewing patterned surfaces and material as an invitation to a relational exchange grounded in narrative, embodied memory, and recognition.

Gestalt principles guide my composition, particularly continuation and figure-ground relationships, which I use to create perceptual tension between order and disruption. This resonates with how cultural patterns balance coherence with complexity. I am also informed by Gell's emphasis on artefacts as agents mediating social relations; I view patterned surfaces as inviting viewers into a relational exchange grounded in touch, recognition, and embodied memory. "*Art objects are indexes of the intentionalities of*

others” (Gell. A, 1998, p, 7), materialising human intention, allowing the material to participate in social interaction.



Figure. 3

Crucially, it is vital I approach cultural pattern sources as inspiration with high ethical care, avoiding direct appropriation, instead focusing on the universal processes and rhythms of the artwork. By using repetition, variation, and careful consideration of placement, I can communicate across societies. My interest does not lie in quoting direct cultural traditions, but the understanding of how patterns emerge from cultural histories and perceptual structures, and how I can reinterpret those alongside my personal values and contemporary practice.

Across my chosen case studies, there were several common functions of pattern, texture, form, and materiality. As an identity, pattern provides a visual vocabulary to express social status, lineage, and belonging. Kente cloth encoding lineage, wealth, and clan identity, kimono designs signaling age, season and formality, and Islamic geometric shape expressing shared theological framework. Condensed pattern enables narrative to be shared through a visual vocabulary; proverbs in Kente cloths, literary references in kimonos, and metaphysical concepts in Islamic geometry. All embedding the narrative in visual rhythm, while reflecting local materials, climates, and technologies. Semiotic, anthropological and Gestalt principals underpin how pattern is perceived across cultures, providing a clear psychological coherence, encoding the mediate relationship between makers, viewers, wearers, and communities; inviting the material to act as an agency, to narrate to the community. These theories enable surfaces, patterns, materials, and form to be more than mere shapes, but a culturally specific medium to articulate identity and belonging, without the need for written vocabulary.

This essay has demonstrated how patterns, textures, and form operate as an integral part of cultural society and media to aid in communicating identity, place, narrative, and symbolism. Through a range of theoretical perspectives, it becomes clear that surface pattern design is more than a passive ornamental decoration, but an active system of communication and agency. These insights aid me in my personal practice to inform a relational approach to pattern design that is perceptual and materially grounded.

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List of Images

Figure. 1 Elisofon, E. (1971). *Field Collection*. Available at <https://new.artsmia.org/programs/teachers-and-students/teaching-the-arts/artwork-in-focus/asante-kente-cloth> (Accessed: 20 November 2025)

Figure. 2 Shunsen (1762) *Beauty in Chrysanthemum Kimono*. Available at <https://www.roningallery.com/Crysanthum-Kimono> (Accessed: 25 November 2025)

Figure. 3 Beechey, T. (2025) *Contour lines of Pen Y Fan* [Linoprint]. University of Wales Trinity St. David (Viewed: 2 December 2025).