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Question 2:

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

This essay will define skill in association with Surface Pattern Design while exploring ideologies of craftsmanship within the practices of artist William Morris and wood carver Grinning Gibbons. The essay begins by defining skills delving into self-critic and problem solving to improve educational and personal growth as a designer. It looks at traditional hand skill and digital methods of designing, taught to us in the modern day and observing the principle of consistency and repetitiveness through learning processes such as screen printing and digital designing skills. As stated by (Lidwell, Holden and Butler, 2010, p.56) *“consistency enables people to efficiently transfer knowledge to new contexts, learn new things quickly and focus attention”*.

As my second point within the essay, I will discuss William Morris. William Morris was a British textiles designer, artist, printer, poet, novelist and socialist activist with the British Arts and Crafts Movement. The Arts and Crafts Movement was built on the concerns of the industrialisation on traditional craft and design and as a response designers and creators pioneered new approaches towards decorative arts. Morris was an influential figure during this time and actively promoted craftsmanship and the beauty of nature. As a poet he recognised the romantic in literature and inspired *“a feeling for the romance of external nature”* (Bevir, 1998, p.7) giving the idea that nature is an essential for good art. Although being perceived as a high romantic image, Morris emphasised on the labour to be a craftsman, arguing that art involved all things made by man, expressed the human spirit. He recognised hand skill as a

focused way of creating, which was a great way to acknowledge the detailing within the designer's artwork.

Grinling Gibbons my next focus within this essay was known as a wood carver. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century his masterpieces embellished palaces, country houses, churches, and museums around Britain. His intricate work depicting fruit and flowers in detailed hyperrealism inspired craftsmanship and practitioners of the modern day, regarding him "as the greatest decorative carver in British history" (Grinling Gibbons society, 2021). Both Morris and Gibbons have made their mark within the design industry, inspiring all practices of art. Both having a skill that has a unique style and is instantly recognisable.

The definition of skill is the ability to do something well especially when actively practised for example, "going over an action again and again, by contrast, enables self-criticism" (Sennett, 2008, p.38). Self-critic allows you to evaluate your perceived flaws, this can improve your personal growth and self-awareness when overcoming areas of weakness. Keeping our skill knowledge up to date allows problem solving to become easier. As a Surface Pattern Designer, problem solving is a key focus in our studies. We are taught a variety of practical processes and it is essential to keep practising as it improves our technique and allows us to perfect our outcomes.

Screen printing is a well-used process within Surface Pattern Design requiring plenty of research to achieve the best outcome. Having the knowledge of what materials and binders work best together, can enhance your outcome. "Skill opens up in this way only because the rhythm of solving and opening up occurs again and again" (Sennett, 2008, p.38). Although Sennett (2008) suggest that skills improve through practice, only by searching and experimenting with new approaches can you

improve, this requires effort and attention. Continuous work and reflection on your skills will only benefit your abilities and expertise to be confident in yourself and performance as a designer. As a university student, typically we feel embarrassed going outside of our comfort zone. However, we are directed towards engaging with learning opportunities such as work experience, pushing ourselves to exceed our limits and “expand our sphere of comfortable action” (Hamre, E. 2020). Practitioners often plan their whole day around their profession, an example of this within my study of Surface Pattern Design is workshop days and technical blocks. Sessions such as these teach us processes and methods that we need to learn to be as creative as we can be with our design and artwork. Practicing these on a regular basis helps develop our way of thinking and skills within the design process.

Born in Walthamstow in 1894, William Morris had a privileged childhood, he spent time exploring local parkland, forest and churches which helped him develop his fondness with landscapes, buildings, and historical romance. After school he attended Oxford University and became a member of a group known as ‘The Brotherhood’. “The Brotherhood” gave him an awareness of the division in contemporary society. This sparked Morris to try and create a substitute to the dehumanising industrial systems.

Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. founded in 1861, were a group of like-minded artists and craftsman, who emphasised on creating everything by hand. This contradicted the mainstream focus on industrialised progress. Having respect for displaced traditional arts and medieval-inspired aesthetics, influenced house and church decoration. In 1875 Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co were disbanded, and Morris replaced the company with Morris & Co. He focused on textile dyeing,

emphasising on the revival of organic dyes such as indigo, walnut shells and roots. After learning the skills of dyeing Morris turned his attention to silk weaving. Although he dabbled in these processes, he mastered the art of woodblock printing and created the most recognisable textile patterns of the nineteenth century as seen below.



Figure 1. *Balmoral Wallpaper* (1887)



Figure 2: *Fruit* (1865)

Fruit (1865) a design of branches of fruit trees bearing limes and pomegranates was the 3rd wallpaper pattern design he had made, it demonstrated the same informal naturalism of his first two designs, '*Trellis*' (1862) and '*Daisy*' (1864). His success relies on his well-practiced observation of nature, each of his designs expressed in naturalistic style or one that is formalised and flatter, all concentrating on plant-based forms. Celebrating the forms he saw in British gardens, fields, and hedgerows rather than exotic and imported blooms made his work unprecedented compared to favoured wallpapers in the naturalistic French style in the 1860's (V&A, 2021). Exploring the idea of the connection with nature, "Pattern should express the vigour and growth of the plant form that inspired them...as if it had plenty of capacity for more growth...but above all, pattern, in whatever medium, should have the inevitability of nature" (Naylor, 1971, p.106).

Another form of pattern repeats, and traditional hand printing is screen printing. The process of pressing ink through a mesh screen with a design to create an imprint onto the surface below is also known as serigraphy or silk screen printing. It is a favourable technique as it allows the artist to reproduce the design multiple times, which is an efficient technique for creating large batches of product. This technique is used in a range of industries for creating canvases, poster, artwork, fabrics, and textiles. With other specialised inks it is also possible to print onto wood, metal, plastics, and glass. "In short, you can print with practically any viscous substance" (Biegeleisen, 1974). From improving your skill with this technique and becoming an experienced printer it gives you the opportunity to be more intricate with multi-coloured designs. The screen-printing process popularised in 1962 when Andy Warhol exhibited his Campbell soup print as shown in the below figure.



Figure 3. *Campbells Soup I* (1698)

Screen printing history dates back to the early 1900's, which was a development from the earlier printing methods such as a printing press. The operation of a press became a form of communication that altered the structure of society right up to the present day. Nowadays communication is an effortless task for most of society. Modern technology focuses on efficiency and speed, paving the way for multi-functional devices such as smartphones and allowing computers to be faster, portable, high-powered making our lives effortless. Within my studies technology is another fundamental way of creating, by using Adobe creative software this gives us the option of generating artwork digitally. Although in the computer area "there are no easily identifiable paradigmatic skills" (Sternberg and Preiss, 2011, p.14), sustaining technology skills is an essential way of life for mine and future generations to come.

Technology, original Greek meaning is the "systematic treatment of an art" (Hayes, McLoughlin and Fairclough, 2011, p.5) a technical method of accomplishing a practical purpose. This meaning is appropriate for the design industry for which we may require technology to convert a design into a finished product, such as a digital

print process for a tea towel. Design technology is broad as it incorporates a variety of specified technologies, such as need to know and good to know skills. Need to know technologies are related to the work of a designer and is an essential skill and understanding of a particular subject/process. Good to know technologies may not be essential for designing but some understanding will be beneficial to improve skill set and knowledge (Hayes, McLoughlin, and Fairclough, 2011, p.5).

Although technology is an immense part of our process and skill as designers, William's aim was to "protect and revive the traditional techniques of handmade production that were being replaced by machines" (My Modern Met, 2018).

Investigating Sennett's (2008) theory on machines, supports the position that artisan and skilled workers were replaced by mechanism. These mechanisms accomplished tasks done only by hand, despite craftsman disliking the innovations of technology, others applaud the revolution. Morris envisioned artist taking pleasure in creating crafts by hand in the agrarian socialist world, promoting craftsmanship and persevering traditional methods and skill.

"It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that world; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practices the great art of adapting means to end. Nothing is now done directly, or by hand: all is by rule and calculated contrivance" (Carlyle, 1829)

Grinling Gibbons was a renowned wood carver with a distinctive style of decoration that transformed the interiors of many palaces, churches, and institutions within the nation. Using his virtuoso carving skills he fulfilled intricacy, precision, and deceptive

naturalism. The sensitivity of Gibbons work continues to inspire with contemporary artists, for example Figure 4. *Carved Cravat (1690)*.



Figure 4. *Carved cravat (1690)*

Figure 5. *Lace Ascot (1980)*

Figure 5 shows a knitted lace cravat created with pliable wire made by textiles and jewellery artist Arline Fisch who was inspired by the limewood carved “lace” cravat by Grinling Gibbons figure 4.



Figure 6. *Panel of Cosimo III de' Medici (1682)*

Demonstrated in two commissioned large panels, Gibbons' virtuoso skills were at their peak, evidently carving his own signature in both pieces. With subtle surface detail and profound undercutting, the design "is rich in composition and sophisticated in the symbolism of friendship between princes" (V&A, 2021). Connecting contrasting forms and materials in flowing combinations making his technical skills look effortless. Although Gibbons gained his fame as a wood carver, his aim was to be recognised as a stone and bronze sculptor. As a draughtsman his skill and ability to manage a large workshop gave him the space to produce a large number of sculptures.

At the age of 42, Gibbons expressed himself in a portrait as a successful man of creative intelligence and technical capability, being an artist rather than a craftsman. Coming from Rotterdam, the Netherlands and being educated in continental artistic traditions he desired work as a decorative carver in England. Being famous for his decorative carving in limewood overshadowed what he built as a business that supplied statutory and church monuments made of stone and marble, and statues cast in bronze as seen below in figure 7.



Figure 7. *A putto holding the crown and coat of arms of Ireland (1686)*

In conclusion, the benefits of skills as a designer, artist and craftsman have adapted throughout centuries. From factors such as the evolution of machines and technology and traditional methods being adjusted and passed on from practitioner to learner. For instance, William Morris believed that skill was more established when art was created by man and not by machine as he quoted, “apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization” (Morris, n/a). This is associated with the work of Richard Sennett (2008), he explored the understanding of a craftsman and the difficult challenges they had to face as machines came into play, taking over jobs, and changing the industry for most designers. “Weavers, bakers, and steel workers have all embraced tools that eventually turned against them” (Sennett, 2008, p.81), this suggests that the majority of workers opened their arms to the idea of modern systems, systems that are constantly transforming and ever evolving today. As a Surface Pattern Designer it is important to maintaining the balance of technological and traditional skills, allowing both methods to complement each other and to progress and evolve the skills learnt from these. Skills of intricacy such as the work of Grinling Gibbons has left a powerful legacy that has succeeded through several centuries, being adorned in public buildings such as St Pauls Cathedral guaranteed that his style and work was not easily forgotten. During the 20th century Gibbon’s work, along with many examples of Gibbon style carving, became part of the greatest art collections worldwide. With the subject choice of flora and fauna, executed with details of hyperreal naturalism with compositions, drops and swags of entangled natural matter, it is impossible to ignore the skill, capabilities, and time that hand crafted artists take when creating a piece of design or carving. Celebrated as

legacies within British history, Morris and Gibbons showed the passion and skill it takes to become a good designer, acknowledging the history before them and the craftsmanship that they passed on to inspire other artists in the modern day.

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Figures:

Figure 1. Morris, W. (1887) *Balmoral wallpaper*. Available at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/william-morris-and-wallpaper-design> (accessed: 7 December 2021).

Figure 2. Morris, W. (1865) *Fruit*. Available at:

<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O250834/fruit-wallpaper-morris-william/> (accessed: 6 December 2021).

Figure 3. Warhol, A. (1968) *Campbell's Soup I*. Available at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andy_Warhol#/media/File:Warhol-Campbell_Soup-1-screenprint-1968.jpg (accessed: 6 December 2021).

Figure 4. Gibbons, G. (1690) *Carved Cravat*. Available at:

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Figure 5. Fisch, A. (1980) *Lace Ascot*. Available at:

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Figure 6. Gibbons, G. (1682) *Panel of Cosimo III*. Available at:

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Figure 7. Gibbons, G. and Quellin, A. (1686) *A putto holding the crown and coat of arms of Ireland*. Available at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/grinling-gibbons-an-introduction> (accessed 7 December 2021)

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