

Question 2:

Define skill in the context of your own practice and the work of

two

artists/designer/makers/ from the lecture series

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Skill is defined in the Collins Dictionary as ‘the knowledge and ability that enables you to do something well’ (2021). This essay will investigate the definition of skill within Surface Pattern Design using the perspectives of artists Owen Jones and William Morris. Their ideologies both explore the use of handicraft and its benefits in design. This essay begins by delving into the meaning and connotations of skill and how it is fundamental in Design. From this it begins to discuss how Jones and Morris use different branches of skill within handicraft exploring: symmetry, narrative, golden ratio and colour. This will discuss how different branches of skill collate to create the perfect design.

Skill was initially derived as a means of survival. We as humans used lithic technology (the ability to produce tools from stone) as an initial way to create. ‘Tools directed the development of minds’ (Ornstein 1997, p20) and therefore, our hands that make the tools are associated with the process of craft. The development of our minds led to the evolution of our own creativity. Writer Raymond Williams defines craft as a skill, suggesting work made by hand is true skill (Walker 1989, p38). Like lithic technology, the process of creating handmade artifacts tells a story, and this story builds a narrative for the audience.

The article *Storytelling and Narrative Knowing* by Sarah Worth explores the epistemic qualities of a narrative. Narrative reasoning goes beyond description to represent an order of events. ‘The more developed one's ability to narratively reason the more one can get out of stories... the ability to retrieve information readily and to find coherence where it does not obviously exist.’ (Worth 2008, p54). Through the process of lithic technology, we have expanded our minds and our understanding of tacit knowledge in order to see and predict information that is not clearly there. This suggests that through the skill of design, creators can communicate with others through their own makings. Psychologist Paul Harris takes this further in the interview ‘*Who needs imagination?*’, where he expresses how narrative builds a mental image in the mind’s eye “*And it is that mental model that they retain over a long period of time rather than the particular words.*” (Harris 2002). So, a mental image with a narrative is more likely to retain in the mind than words.

It is through storytelling that designers can communicate. ‘It is the original method of passing knowledge...and remains one of the most compelling methods for richly communicating knowledge’ (Lidwell 2003, p230).

Storytelling and narrative give skill meaning, expresses to others, and can engage an audience in design. It creates a connection with the responder and provides context and understanding. Again, the use of the mental model means

that art can become personal for viewers. ‘This is a phenomenon unique to storytelling’ (Lidwell 2003, p230). It is this ability from craft that can convey meaning to the viewer. In Surface Pattern Design it is desired to create work that pleases the viewer and one way to do this is through narrative. Creating something that speaks for itself is what entices the viewer into connecting with it. Through hand crafts like print, the personality of the maker is shown through the process to which the outcome can be understood by the viewer with the maker in mind.

The epistemology of narrative can be seen through the work of architect, designer and theorist, Owen Jones. His ideologies are expressed through his manifesto in his book ‘*The Grammar of Ornament*’. Jones’ propositions discuss certain keys to a successful design. For example, propositions 3 and 10 communicate how all designs should be proportionate to create harmony. This harmony reflects true beauty as it is what satisfies the mind’s eye. It is beauty that attracts the viewer to build narrative onto a design. Beauty shows personality to the viewer by being that initial connection. An important element to design beauty is symmetry. The book, *The universal principles of design* talks about how symmetry is a fundamental aspect to beauty, within design it represents a balance to the eye (Lidwell 2003, p234). In relation to Jones’ research, symmetry creates a harmony ‘Harmony of form consists in the proper

balancing, and contrast of, the straight, the inclined, and the curved (Jones 1856, p6). This creates a satisfaction to the mind's eye and allows an audience to be drawn in.

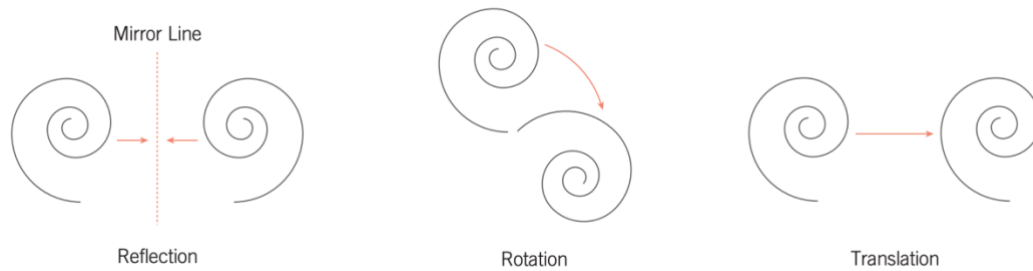


Figure 1 – Lidwell 2003, p234

Figure one explores how harmony of form and symmetry correspond. In relation to craft, design that appeals to the eye is necessary to entice the viewer into the story of the art. The figure explores proposition 11 'all lines should flow out of the parent stem' (Jones 1856, p6). Here you can visualise how a single motif can grow and harmonise with a design. In handicraft, the figure can envision how one would use a block print to recreate symmetry and how to create the precision that is needed for the perfect design. Jones also researches this in his own proposition, giving the example of the medieval ornament.

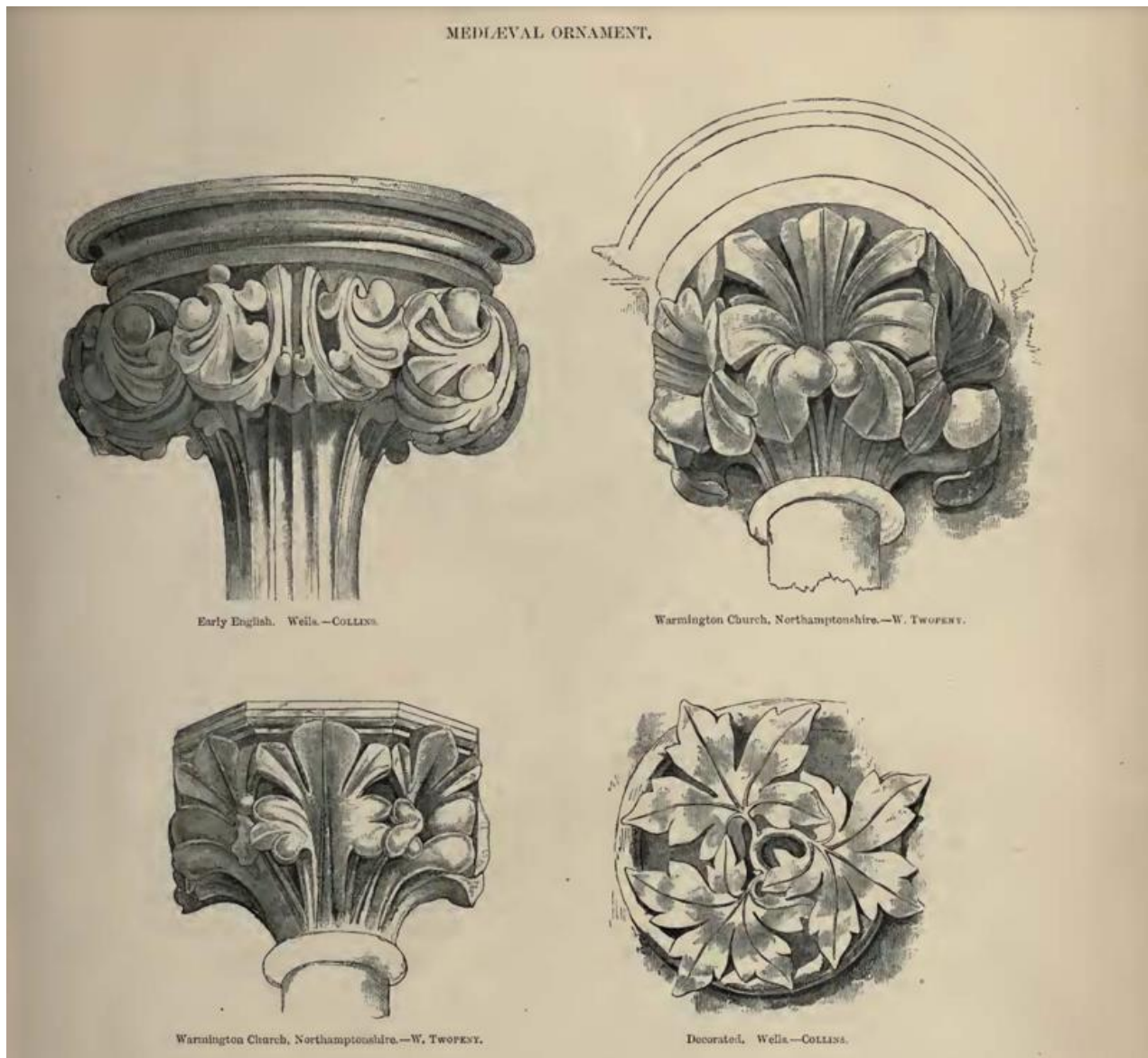


Figure 2 (Jones 1856, p34)

As reflected in the medieval ornament study. Jones researches and compares the skill of symmetry (fig2). Scientist Alan Lightman states "Symmetry represents order, and we crave order in this strange universe we find ourselves in... [It] helps us make sense of the world around us". This leads to the admiration of perfection. The perfection in symmetry is what satisfies us into enjoying the skill of design. Jones uses this in his own work which follows with his propositions. Here (fig2) we see symmetry observations in columns through

England. They represent symmetry through abstract nature. The symmetry here brings a collectiveness to the architecture, and I envision a well-balanced, perfect structure. This suggests that perfect symmetry helps convince the viewer everything is proper.

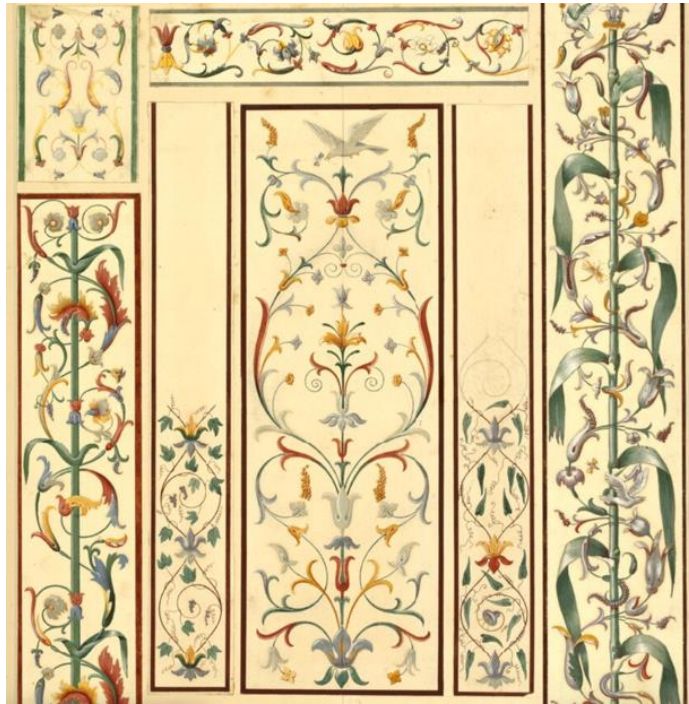


Figure 3 - Original drawings for Italian, No.2, Plate LXXXVI

Figure 3 expands on the medieval ornament to express how the use of symmetry aids a narrative. The symmetry in this pattern design has an immediate flow through reflection and colour. The reflection and growth marry each other to form a dance across the page, leaving the mental image to be elegant, dainty and precise. Colour also comes into play here and reflects proposition 14 'Colour is used to assist in the development of form, and to distinguish objects or parts of

objects one from another.’ (Jones 1856,p7). Colour distinguishes characters in a design and only when all are formed next to each other is the true interpretation seen. In this piece, the colours emit a calmness and further imply the narrative to be like a growth of movement as the colours seem to expand out of one another. It is this narrative that allows the viewer to have a connection which is key to design. It is art that shows the viewer a journey/experience. Jones also states that each motif has a purpose ‘nothing could be removed and leave the design equally good or better.’ (Jones 1856, p5).

With purpose brings flow and harmony with the design as each piece is connected to tell a story and should be able to be traced back to the ‘parent stem’ (Jones 1856, p5). Jones’ work is taken from his surroundings, and his use of composition is like the use of language. Through these idealised motifs that follow the propositions, we are allowed to translate what we see and learn from it. It is this development of learning that originated from the evolution caused by lithic technology. Here we see a direct link to how a good narrative develops our minds. Further, how good skill develops our minds.

Lithic technology was produced from what surrounds us. Jones’ designs are formed from the observation of what was around him. In page 164 of his book, he states that during the best periods, all art observed the arrangements of nature (*Grammar of Ornament*). These observations should also be recorded as

'conventional representations' and should *'convey the intended image to the mind'* (Jones 1856, p6).

Like symmetry in design, we also find symmetry in nature. It is this perfection that draws us in to nature in the first place. Jones' work reflects a perfection in nature which is apparent in his propositions. This symmetry in nature goes back to what the viewer finds ideally perfect. To expand this 'All ornament should be based on geometrical construction'(Jones 1856, p5) It is this idea that begins to discuss the perfection of the Golden Ratio. The Golden Ratio is seen as a proportion for perfection, and it is considered beautiful in art and *'found everywhere in nature'* (Souza 2019). The article: *The Golden Section and beauty in nature* discusses its importance. 'It determines the state of systems and the formation of patterns of structure and function.' (Souza 2019). But why does this captivate us? Writer Benjamin Carlson researches how the golden ratio is the fastest piece of information that our brain can retain. *'The human eye is capable of interpreting an image featuring the golden ratio faster than any other.'* (Carlson 2010). This is because the shapes are manifested throughout our surroundings, it is a shape that we subconsciously see everywhere and are therefore always subconsciously seeking it. Jones uses geometry and symmetry to explore this and the combination with natural elements means that viewers

are naturally guided towards his work when the golden ratio is apparent. This is a fundamental design skill to incorporate in order to appeal and satisfy the mind.

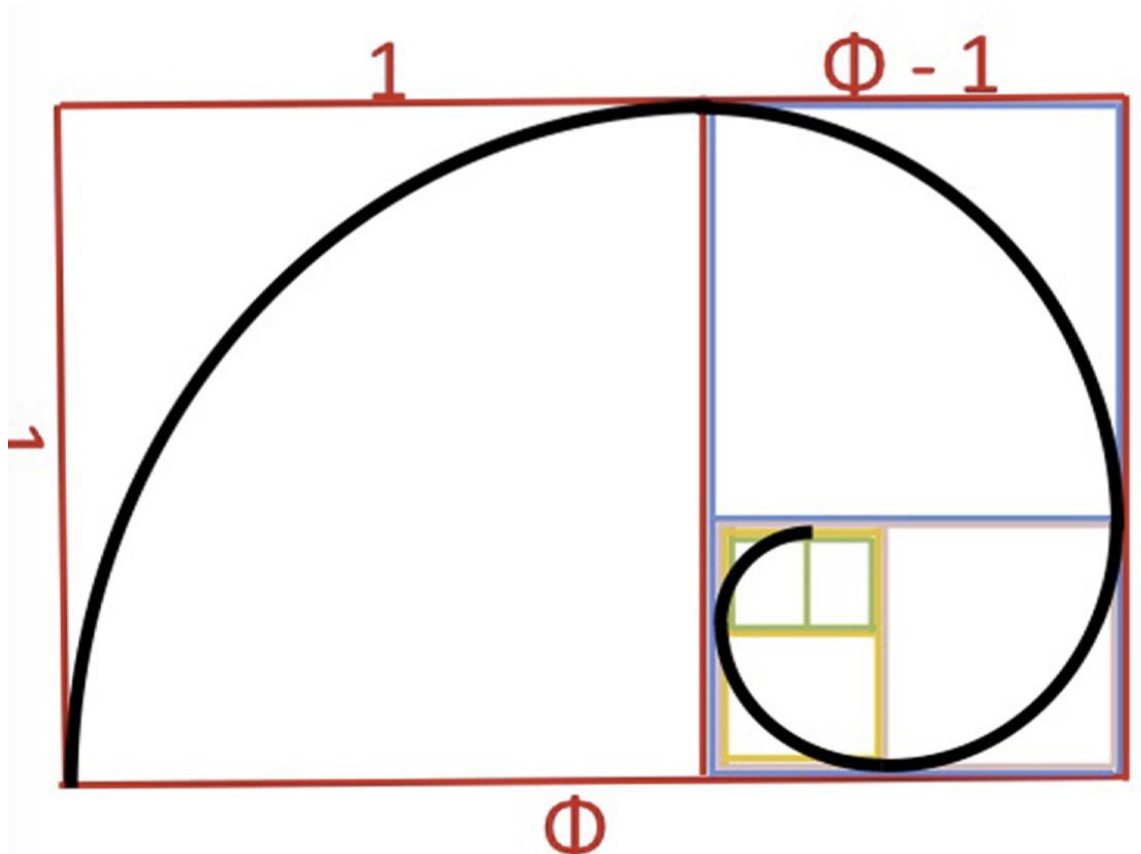


Figure 4 (Souza,2019) the golden ratio

Jones' work defines skill through the perfection of nature which explores colour, symmetry and geometry to conclude what his propositions define as perfect. Regarding this use of natural perfection, artist, textile designer and printer, William Morris explores the perfection of natural surroundings in design. This can be seen in his piece *pimpernel* (Fig5,1876).



Figure 5 Pimpernel, 1876

Pimpernel (Fig5), Like Jones' work, uses skill to convey the perfect natural design. The colours accompany each other like layers, looking through the design like a floral trellis. The eye is immediately caught on the soft shades of green and big floral motifs that are distinct with even swirls that proportionate with the golden ratio. Morris' ideologies focus on the handicraft, his writing on *The Revival of Handicraft* explores how the incline of machinery although bad, makes the rarity of handmade art more beautiful '*production by machinery is*

altogether an evil' (Morris, 1888). This reflects on Raymond Williams definition of true skill. The link between handicraft and true skill explores how entirely handmade artifacts are what connects art to nature, and it is this that attracts us to works of art. Further, the national trust discusses '*His wallpapers and textiles used hand-cut and printed woodblocks,*' (Barber, 2021). Morris uses tools that derive from nature. Using this source to derive a tool from nature is like that of lithic technology. The idea that handmade craft creates a development in the mind allows the work produced to be seen differently, like the evolution of the mind, there's also an evolution of work. In *Pimpernel* you can see a development in design, how each block print has been carefully matched in symmetry to the other with perfection in mind. '*If what we need is a new mind, we have the means to make one.*' (Ornstein 1997, pxvi). Through our tools we create a new way of thinking, and this is what Morris has done with nature. Morris valued his traditional printing process as it is what gives design personality different to any other. This contradicts what was being introduced at the time. The industrial era birthed mass production via the machine that sought to imitate and reproduce direct objects which killed off the 'beauty, imagination and order,' (Morris 2012, p179) that Morris thought so fundamental. Hence the rise of the 'arts and crafts movement'. This was born so that artists like William Morris could rebel against machine made design 'production by machinery is altogether an evil' (Morris, 1888).

Like Owen Jones, Morris followed certain rules. Morris too didn't think it was ethical to imitate nature directly like a machine would. Therefore, when designing with nature they create their own visions with the skill of handicraft.

'Flowers or other natural objects should not be used as ornaments' (Jones 1856, p6). But that *'ornamental patterns'* should have *'beauty, imagination and order,'* (Morris 2012, p179). And these principles were used across all work of Jones and Morris. Through the imagining of nature we are allowed to repeat and perfect it, to give it vibrance and meaning. It is that narrative that is conveyed through Morris' work. He takes a motif and gives it character which as a viewer is taken in and digested.

In an essay written about Morris's ideologies, Writer S. Boctor discusses how Morris's philosophies informed the shape of the design world. Through the beauty and imagination in *Pimpernel (Fig5)* we see integral aspects of design and without *'craftsmanship, and individual vision ..., a considerable portion of the design world and its hallmark achievements would not exist.'* (Boctor 2017, p3). Individual development is required for the development of the many. This reflects Morris's personal view as his designs were intended for the many not the few. This can also be said for Surface Pattern design. It is the true skill of handicraft that keeps the viewer in mind during creation, it is this skill that can

be seen through design as what is made is made in consideration of being perfect in the eye of the other.

To conclude, Skill is the act that handicraft can create a connection between art and viewer through visuals. Owen Jones and William Morris use visuals to define what the viewer would describe as the perfect design. Through their theories and propositions it's apparent that their narrative's drive their creations and it is this passion of the hand made that expresses skill. 'Skills allow us to change and grow in response to new information' (Kristan 2003, p81).

Design skill allows us to learn and evolve through the understanding of the individual and their work.

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Figures

Figure 1: Lidwell, W. (2003) *Symmetry. Universal principles of design* (p. 234). Gloucester, MA, USA, 2010, 112–113.: Rockport publishers.

Figure 2: Jones, O. (1856) *Medieval Ornament. The Grammar of Ornament*. (p.234).

Figure 3: Original drawings for Italian, No.2, Plate LXXXVI, *Grammar of Ornament*, Owen Jones, 1856, London, England. Museum no, 1660 Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 4: Souza, G. (2019) 'The golden ratio. The Golden Section and beauty in nature', *Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology* (p100).

Figure 5: Morris, W. (1876) *Pimpernel*.

