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The Materiality of Surface

Pattern, Form and Texture are three of the basic elements of art. In this essay we will examine how pattern, texture and form can be used to communicate identity, place, storytelling and cultural symbolism. I will give two illustrated case studies which i feel reflect in my own personal style of taking elements of more traditional art and changing it to something more non traditional and quirky.

Pattern is usually a motif that has been repeated around itself many times. Pattern can be displayed in a Regular format where a motif is arranged in a regular or predictable way for example the *Strawberry Thief* pattern by William Morris used on Morris&Co. wallpaper and textiles, which has a bird on a background of strawberry plants repeating in a grid pattern. It can be arranged in an Irregular format where the motif is usually unpredictable in size and shape for example the variety in the stars of *Starry Night* by Van Gogh. It could also be arranged in a Radiating format, where there is a central motif that spreads out in every direction for example, the pattern in a Persian Rug.

Texture is how an object feels. This can be Visual texture which is a way of using colour, lines, shading and highlighting to create an illusion of texture when there is none for example in the trompe-l'œil technique which is used to trick the viewer into thinking a painting is 3D. It can be Physical Texture which is using the medium to build texture into a piece to create an illusion of movement and depth for example in Jackson Pollock's paintings where he built layers of paint by splatting it at a canvas. It could also be Actual Texture which is when a (usually 3D) piece feels the way it looks, like a fur covered piece feeling like fur or an ice sculpture feeling cold to the touch.

Form is the the 3D shape of a piece. It can be Real Form for example an actual 3D cube, or Implied Form using Visual Texture on a 2D surface to create the appearance of a 3D object for example a 2D painting using perspective and shading to make it look like a 3D cube. There are two types of Real form, Organic which is natural or realistic looking shape for example for example Jason deCaires Taylors underwater sculptures that are cement cast from the people forms, and Geometric which is a stylised,

unnatural shape for example Sou Fujimotos piece 'many small cubes' precariously and randomly stacked cubes of varying sizes. Perceived mass in implied form is when fabric is painted to look light and floaty, or stone is painted to look heavy.

Pattern used in art can help draw attention to, and frames the main subject and changes the way the piece feels, it can also be used decoratively to fill empty space. "Patterns can help create a sense of movement, depth and balance in an artwork." (London Art Exchange, 2025). Texture is used to create depth and perspective, it gives the audience the sense of how something feels and the idea of wanting to touch it. The Form a piece takes can influence how the viewer understands and interprets a piece. "In treating or creating form in art the artist aims to modify natural appearances in order to make a new form that is expressive, that is, conveys some sensation or meaning in itself." (Tate, 2025).

There are some Patterns, Textures and Forms that have a strong identity, and are instantly recognisable. Some can be tied to a specific Country or even region, they can indicate a particular period of time where they were commonly and prolifically used, they can tell you a story sometimes on a singular piece, sometimes through a series of panels or a frieze, they can also be steeped in cultural symbolism. Some examples of this are;

The Greek Meander (Key) pattern is found on a lot of artefacts and architecture and is associated with Ancient Greece.

Tartan pattern is traditionally used on fabrics and is Scottish. Different tartans can identify different families/clans and each pattern has a different meaning.

Traditional Aboriginal dot art is found in Rocks paintings, and in Bark paintings in Australia using locally found materials to create pigments, "all Aboriginal art serves a common purpose: to communicate ancestral ties and a deep connection to the land." (ART ARK, 2025)

Navajo rug weaving comes from the Native American Navajo tribe, where the rugs are woven with stories of the deity, Spider Woman, who taught the Navajo people to weave. Hieroglyph borders show up on lots of pottery and tombs from Ancient Egypt, Hieroglyphs were pictorial writings used in tombs to tell the story of the deceased and the gods.

Traditional dragon ('Loong') show up on a lot of Chinese imagery, from ancient times right up to modern day. The Loong is a very stylised form, it has a pattern which is mixture between crocodile and snake scales and is given characteristics of other 'strong' and 'royal' animals.

Mandalas appear a lot in Hindu and Buddhist religion. The Tibetan mandala is created by pouring coloured sands into the pattern, and then sweeping the pattern away. It is seen as a way of gaining wisdom, compassion and guiding individuals towards enlightenment.

As well as some patterns, textures and forms having strong identities, some artists also have a strong and recognisable style that weaves throughout their body of work. This means that you can instantly identify the artist from their work, for example Yayoi Kusama is a Japanese artist whose art takes many forms but mostly including sculptor,

painter and novelist. She is well known for her brightly coloured, pop art style work, filled with polka dots that are very deliberately placed to make certain patterns. When she first started producing her art at the age of ten her style was outrageous for the time when more traditional art was favoured. She became renowned for being Avant-Garde' and standing out from the rest of the artists surrounding her. Her work has influenced the art world so much that it is no longer seen as outrageous and could now be considered traditional by some.

Kusama has suffered since childhood with her mental health, and the polkadots in her work are reflective of that. "These motifs have their roots in hallucinations from which she has suffered since childhood, in which the world appears to her to be covered with proliferating forms." (Victoria Miro, 2025) She is also diagnosed with OCD, and the repetitive pattern of her work is an expression of that. She has taken her personal struggles and experiences, and expressed them as her Identity through her art.

Kusama has told many stories through her art, one being 'Self-Obliteration'. In 1965 Kusama presented her first of many 'happenings'. She painted polka dots on people "Red, green and yellow polka dots can be the circles representing the earth, the sun, or the moon.

Their shapes and what they signify do not really matter. I paint polka dots on the bodies of people, and with those polka dots, the people will self-obliterate and return to the nature of the universe." (Yayoi Kusama, 2025) The pattern of polka dots in these works represents cosmic bodies and painting them on the form of people told the story that those people would one day Self-Obliterate and return to the the universe. '

Another recurring theme in Kusama's work is pumpkins and squashes. Her family business was cultivating seeds, their family home in Matsumoto, Japan, was surrounded by fields of squashes and pumpkins so they tie in very strongly to her personal identity and have a "special place in her iconography. She has described her images of them as a form of self-portraiture." (Victoria Miro, 2025)

In a similar way to Kusama, during my own artistic practice, I have on a few occasions made repeating forms that appear identical from afar but up close you can see the difference on each one as each element is unique and individual. These elements are enveloped within a display of a different and contrasting media. This is my way of communicating my identity as a neurodiverse person, and a commentary on society and expectations of identity.

There are some Forms that although sharing similar characteristics are all unique and individual, one such form is a Sheela-na-gig. Sheela-Na-Gig are a group of stone carvings of naked women, found on Romanesque Norman churches c.12th century. They are often found above window or doors, some have been found lower but these lower carvings generally are more damaged or incomplete. Sheela-na-gig have a very strong sense on cultural symbolism.

There are many Sheela-na-gig in the British Isles and some parts of Northern Europe, in 'Images of Lust - Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches' it says "he did, however, mention some 11 in France (none in Spain), 40 or so in England and over 70 in Ireland. A few have come to light since his work was published" (Weir & Jerman, 1986, p.17). Every carving is different, but the unifying details between them all are a disproportionately large head and vulva, the legs are spread, small breasts and ribcage, and they are always squatting and holding open her vulva. They range from 9-90 cm (Freitag, 2004, p.7). The British Museum describes one in their collection as "Exhibitionist figure or 'Sheela-na-gig', carved on the front of a rectangular block, the head proportionately large with staring eyes and the mouth open to show teeth. The arms are crooked at the elbow to allow the hands to grasp the lips of the vulva above the anus. Small breasts are placed on the chest area, ribs are not indicated, the legs and one foot are shown." (British Museum, 2025). There is no standard pattern on the Sheela-na-gigs, when pattern is used it is usually as an accent for more detail e.g. hair, ribs, wrinkles. The crude form and deeply carved texture of the pieces seems to be more important. In the context of the time period the sheela-na-gig is not unusual in its obscene nature, and many other carvings found within the same churches would be equally grotesque or obscene.

There are different theories on what the Sheela-na-gig represent, some think they are Celtic or Pagan images representing fertility and childbirth, some think that they are used to warn against sexual immorality "the Sheela is a frightening hag whose message does not seem to be immoral but is rather aimed at dispelling any sexual predisposition the viewer might entertain." (Weir & Jerman, 1986, p.11). Some suggest that some were important preexisting carvings which were taken from where they were and used in the construction of the church because of their Cultural Symbolism to the local people. Barbara Freitag says "Judging by their crude realism and poor workmanship they appear to be produced by local amateur carvers rather than by skilled stonemasons. This suggests that the sculptures belong to folk art and a tradition, too important and too intimately bound up with the welfare of the common people to be disregarded by the Christian Church." (Freitag, 2004, p.8)

As well as having cultural symbolism the Sheela-Na-Gig has a strong sense of identity as a grotesque and shocking form. Within my own artistic practice I enjoy taking something traditional and making it non traditional and irreverent. For example on one project i smashed up a porcelain doll and reformed it and covered it in fur and teeth, in another i the traditional medium of clay and sculpted a life like vagina. My work does not have the same cultural significance as the Sheela-na-gig, however it does carry some of the shock value, and communicates my sense of identity as a quirky and unusual individual.

In conclusion we have examined how pattern texture and form can be used to communicate identity, place, storytelling and cultural symbolism. It seems to me that Pattern can often be the visual identifier for communicating identity, place, storytelling and cultural symbolism, like Yayoi Kusama using pattern to express her inner narrative, and culture. Texture is a way to connect physically with the viewer and attract them to

the piece and look deeper into the story that's being told. Form is important for how the viewer connects emotionally with the piece, showing deliberate choice to invoke certain emotions, like the sheela-na-gig having a very crude form, because the final form is not as important as the cultural symbolism behind it and the feelings it evokes. Within my own practice I try to think very carefully about how I use pattern texture and form, to create a connection and communicate my personal story with the audience.

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“An enduring feature of Kusama’s unique art is the intricate lattice of paint that covers the surface of her Infinity Net canvases, the negative spaces between the individual loops of these all-over patterns emerging as delicate polka dots. These motifs have their roots in hallucinations from which she has suffered since childhood, in which the world appears to her to be covered with proliferating forms. “

<https://www.victoria-miro.com/artists/31-yayoi-kusama/>

“Another key motif is the pumpkin form, which has achieved an almost mythical status in Kusama’s art since the late 1940s. Coming from a family that made its living cultivating plant seeds, Kusama was familiar with the kabocha squash in the fields that surrounded her childhood home and the pumpkin continues to occupy a special place in her iconography. She has described her images of them as a form of self-portraiture.”

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