

Paper submitted for “Conscious Communities” special issue of the [Journal of Textile Design Research and Practice](#)

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(CULTURAL + ETHICAL COMMUNITIES)

TITLE:

A visual exchange of everyday history, a creative exploration to build contextual awareness within parallel learning communities.

MAIN TEXT

R1:

Dear R2,

It's a deep breath every year before delivery of the contextual lectures start. Discussing the evolution of style changes from the 1800s to present day to ensure students have points of reference for their own design language. Me in Birmingham, you in Norwich, shaping the narrative for our different cohorts. Sharing WhatsApp encouragement, we celebrate our progress through the timeline! How to ensure the narrative is inclusive of different perspectives? How to not overload? How to connect past with present concerns? Ongoing and evolving challenges!

R2:

Deep breath indeed, each new year and each week! and despite giving these lectures in some shape or form over the last fifteen years or so I still need to refresh my mind and check facts or details, flicking through notes on the bus to work. We've often said it's a vast undertaking but we both reap the reward of knowledge & understanding... and satisfaction in sharing our fascination with design history. We can say that now... & who would have thought a book chapter would evolve too! I suggest as a methodology we are going for emergent.... The process will develop as we pick out details, we each feel appropriate to discuss in relation to contemporary elements and go from there. In the spirit of John Berger and John Christie (Berger 1999) sending musings on colour, linking theory and experience we shall no doubt gather threads and support each other to look at the lectures in fresh ways.

We are in a unique position, sharing the lectures as if from a parent plant, and that we are growing offspring. It's great to know that on a Friday morning in the Midlands you are with me!

R1:

Hi Kate, starting out with a neo-classical observation. Kate Middleton, the then Duchess of York's, dress for the first Earthshot Prize awards illustrates well how in times of uncertainty (climate emergency rather than social revolution) we see classical styles re-emerging as we crave reassurance in its underpinning of logical reasoning. Designer Sarah Burton for the brand Alexander McQueen. Re-wearing a dress wouldn't have made headlines back in the 18th century!

R2:

Hi R1, thanks for starting this off. I agree, there's a reassuring element in how the design stories of each era provide us with what we need in difficult times – and yes, permission to wear things more than once! The measured and reliable guidelines of classical design offer support in chaos, centuries over.

Another observation from the classical statues I pick up on in this lecture is the finely draped fabric, beautifully carved in stone, so solid and yet flowing. Lightweight gathered fabrics for dresses, often styled in the empire line echo this. I also like Mary Katrantzou's highly contemporary mix of classically inspired placement print and pattern design, featuring the pottery and draped fabric in her Spring Summer 2017 collection. I tend to explain that these are my pairings and not necessarily what Mary Katrantzou was looking at in her studio, but the students can make the visual link. Catch up soon, heading to the Grand Tour and the silk route next... R2

R1:

Hi R2,

I currently have work in a group exhibition celebrating the 300th anniversary of the birth of Piranesi - the influential 18th century Italian master etcher, engraver, designer, artist, architect, archaeologist and theorist. [Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1720-1778] He was one of the first to recognise the entrepreneurial possibilities of printing etchings to serve the appetite of wealthy young men for souvenirs of their Grand Tours. These privileged travellers would normally be commissioning oil paintings and buying up actual antiquities to take home to adorn the walls and spaces within their lavish homes – the results of which we enjoy on visits to National Trust properties. As we know from the 'Elgin Marbles', at that time museums were also in the business of 'acquisition', also using their leverage of money and influence. Piranesi provided quickly accessible but exquisitely crafted classical cityscapes.

Today souvenir culture has more likely become posting a quick 'selfie' or buying a cheap fridge magnet – the latter often crude reproductions from poorly-crafted reliefs – with kitsch appeal but questionable in an age of resource scarcity and plastic pollution. Travel is thankfully a less exclusive activity than in Piranesi's day. After Covid, travel feels special again. Will how we mark the 'I was here' moment change? Will we see the value of craftsmanship see a resurgence? Hopefully so.

R2:

Hi R1,

Very topical news this week... and over the last year... With growing dialogue surrounding decolonialisation, the returning of artefacts, removing statues and renaming, including the Museum of the Home in London, our lectures help students understand shifting relationships with the past. The move to acknowledge history as not one fact or account by the white man with power is one, I address early in the lecture series. At school in History lessons this was never discussed, but if it had been I may have been more interested. Who has the voice, and why might there be alternative truths?

R2

R1:

Hi R2,

I completely agree. The students find this lecture quite sobering in relation to the central role that textiles played in empire building, with Britain leading the way. The legacy of the slave trade and the social inequalities of industrial principles remain raw and real. The role of inventions by leading Birmingham industrialists like Mathew Bolton [1728-1809] and James Watt [1736-1819], in enabling the scaling up of production brings it even closer to home for our students.

Chintz fabrics helps to illustrate how the European colonial powerhouses of the day exploited and adapted for competitive advantage. The vibrant lightweight Brazilian Chita (Chintz) fabric is now considered an icon of national identity in Brazil; however its origins can be traced back to European colonization by way of heavier and more structured compositions of Portuguese, Dutch and British versions – and then before that back to Asia.

As a Portuguese colony, Brazil was banned from textile production for fear of disrupting a lucrative export trade. Whilst upper classes wore heavy imported florals, rural workers and slaves wore cheap lightweight cotton fabrics woven by its indigenous peoples, with climate, local materials and botanical references shaping its evolution. It wasn't until the 1920s, long after independence and with the rise of Modernism, that the textiles became universally celebrated and a focus for national pride.

Like knowing the backstory of 'Paisley' fabrics, understanding the importance of seeing the bigger picture is key in developing critical skills. Let's hope our examples inspire our students to ask more questions, look beyond just the aesthetic dimensions of objects and strive for integrity in the design choices they make.

Onwards and upwards! R1

R2:

Hi R1, I really like this lecture as there is so much going on that resonates with today's concerns within and around the textile industry. We can't ignore the centuries of international trade that has gone before and continue to exist. Understanding historic supply chains, not only for raw materials and luxury goods, but also design motifs such as the boteh will help students to see how so much of today has evolved from yesterday. The fact the French and British governments put trade embargoes in place to limit shawls etc being imported and threatening the home industries, was the making of Paisley's textile industry, but as a result the international identity of the motifs of Asia and the Middle East are lost to the name of a Scottish town.

This section of the lectures enables me to bring in conversations about ownership, cultural appropriation, trade powers and manufacturing, including offshoring and the return of localism. When in 2013 the Rana Plaza factory building collapsed in Bangladesh, we in the west were forced to face facts about how our clothes are made, but a Saturday in Norwich city centre demonstrates we still live in a time of fast fashion, with the new Primark busy as usual. This reminds me of conversations we've had over the years in relation to our own wardrobe audits, and how many times we've worn certain garments. I'm still wearing clothes from the last century! Take care, have a good week... R2

R1:

Hi R2,

Arts & Crafts lecture seems to resonate the most to me. I love the image of Ashbee's [Charles Robert Ashbee 1863-1942] workers stretching together before work! The focus on wellbeing, placing value on communal working, local materials and the vernacular is where we find ourselves much more after covid. We know the pandemic was an accelerator. A renewed interest in William Morris [1824-1896] designs was evident before, although the fast fashion context was rather ironic! On-shoring production, buying local, clothes swaps and knitting clubs are building communities and more understanding of what is behind products. Students love to collaborate – and this research is about how much more enriching and supportive working and thinking alongside others is!

For many and complex reasons we are seeing increasing poor mental health within and beyond university life - even the most resilient people I know are finding things challenging. You with drawing, me with stitch, our practices are so important in keeping us on track...

Events like Craftspace's In:Site annual festival in Birmingham shows the power of connecting people to engage with materials and processes and the value of its contribution. Students are wanting to work in this field and make a difference in their communities. The definition of the 'industries' our courses are designed to support needs to be understood to include this important area. Fashion and interior commercial markets still dominate perceptions.

Morris's vision of humanised production and quality goods for all ultimately stumbled in the face of mechanisation and modernisation, but the Guilds he was involved in live on - organisations like the Society of Designer Craftsmen, which I'm proud to be a member of. Today our planet is sending clear prompts that things need to change. It's got to be more radical this time. This a great lecture to underpin discussions about how.

Keep stretching!

R1

R2:

In response to the William Morris one ...

Hi R1, that's so true, the value of wellbeing is playing out and amplified with the pandemic, with textiles and creativity being key players. The curriculum we teach must embrace the wider opportunities to advocate for our discipline and prepare graduates for new roles. It's easy to think of fashion and interiors as the contexts we base design challenges around in the studio, but more and more we are looking at how design skills can solve social issues.

This period of history, late C19th seems to take several lectures to get beyond, it's a fascinating period as there is so much going on including European fine art language, dress reform, manufacturing development and of course the small matter of public taste.

I enjoy presenting William Morris' quote "Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful" delivered in a speech in Birmingham in 1880, set against Adolf Loos intolerance for ornamentation "We have outgrown ornament; we have fought our way through to freedom from ornament" in his writing, Ornament and Crime from 1908.

... Is what we do all about decoration and ornamentation, are we adding trims, frills and flourishes? Some people think we do! And how or who may define beauty or use? This has got me thinking about the far broader responsibility and commitment design plays in the world around us in making cultural statements to shift narratives, to develop personal identities and whether sentimentality would be considered useful.

When we were in Rouen, France we noticed so many building facades with clear WW2 damage and then we spotted this one example featuring Dispatchwork, by the artist Jan Vormann [1983-] had patched the damage using Lego, bringing greater attention to the damage and as a result the events that resulted in lasting damage. Of course, it reminded me of your Ceramic Patchwork, but also how creative minds can bring people together in celebrating / commemorating events. Is this decoration? Is this superfluous?... This made me question projects I've worked on over the years, and I hope the resolved designs added more than decoration... and visual noise! How do we pose these questions with students, to help them carve their own journey, when they are already given the narrative that textile design is a niche discipline?

#weallwearpants

R1:

Hi R2, jumping around the timeline a little, but there is nothing like visiting a flea market or car boot to bring it home about the volume of 'stuff' that is in circulation - the fact that it is being re-sold rather than buried or burnt is at least a positive. They are great places for 'style spotting' in relation to the lecture series which I encourage students to do. Even here, trends in style come and go. The last 'boot' I did, 1950s crockery that would have previously been snapped up just languished... I spotted these Deco forks last week in Lisbon and thought of the useful discussions about form and function your collection inspires! I've incorporated a weekly drawing activity into lectures to help students check their understanding of styles and apply this into design... Tree motifs in the style of the lecture... Works particularly well for these early lectures where styles have clear design identities. Often very revealing!

Do you still run out of time in sessions? TEAMS delivery is efficient, but the interaction of live delivery is so much more effective!

R1

R2:

Hi R1

Re: Deco / value / collecting musings

Yes, I still find myself talking fast, there is so much to fit in, and I don't want to miss anything out, especially as now I have to cover both Fashion and Textile Design content more clearly. Each year that passes I learn other connections or facts that build the greater story that I don't want to leave out.

I also miss shared practical activities in the lecture theatre – I remember getting groups to make tree drawing exercises in relation to Mondrian's [1872-1944] stylising and the interpretations / misunderstanding of abstraction. You reminded me of it & I love your Deco drawings, so thanks for inspiring me ... and yes, great forks!

Funnily enough, in relation to value and Art Deco style I always mention our family story of Clarice Cliff [1899-1972] pottery at about this time. My sister and I played with Clarice Cliff Bizarre ware in our mud pie tea parties in my grandma's garden in the 1970s, with no awareness of heritage or value. Years on, what remains of the crockery has been put in a cabinet, behind glass, suggesting the value has been recognised and kept for best / decoration. I see this as demonstrating changing fashions and how one thing falls out of favour and another one becomes desirable. Wasn't your Ceramic Patchwork defined as a future antique by Homes and Antiques magazine? How do you feel about that?

Discussing value and taste is certainly a good one – understanding individual and collective fashions and preferences. What does one's own collection say about them? I think I'll start an enquiry on this one next academic year. I've been sorting the loft and came across two boxes of frogs... ornamental ones of course. This collection was formed in the 1980s, as gifts and purchases, but although very little value to anyone, the sentimental value, the connections to those people and places holds value to me – and I continue to keep the collection much to the family's amusement! I don't think collecting via eBay is the same as hunting at car boot sales – maybe I just think it's safer not to start online!

R1:

Hi R2,

Each of the nine lectures I've restructured the programme into could be extended! It is so hard to prune them down and it makes me realise how much I control the narrative. Yes, entering the 20th century does feel like a milestone, but as communication and interconnectedness grows, it becomes a much more complex picture. I enjoy how this design distinctiveness became part of national identity building and a strategy to gain competitive advantage. The pace of change really accelerates - by the time we get to the post-modernism lecture we get styles almost tripping over themselves with elements plundered out of context – quoting The Simpsons [S13 E3) – “Weird for the sake of Weird” - always makes me smile.

Back in early summer managed to get to Daniel Lismore's Be Yourself, Everyone Else is Already Taken, exhibition in Coventry (Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, February-June 2022) – great title and impactful work. I really responded to the honesty and vulnerability he showed in his journey. Mixing charity shop fabrics with couture garments, ephemera with luxury trinkets and juxtaposing cultures, styles and forms - his is such a playful, refreshing and questioning approach. I love that they are assemblages that are constantly changing, exploring identity and iconography with sophistication

and punk irreverence. He shows we can still be maximalist whilst embracing thrift and care culture! Fashion references within early lectures are more about the conventions of the times, discussions about what becomes 'acceptable' in society - whereas later lectures it's people like Miyake [1938-2022] Chalayan [1970-] and Van Herpen [1984-] - all textile innovators - provide pivotal artistic catwalk moments that propel the design conversation forward. Daniel's approach to 'live life as art' continues this and is refreshingly uncompromising. Note the 'Greek keys' appearing again...

I find original dressers much rarer these days within cohorts. You've posted great images of you in the past as a student exploring your 'art school' identity! I enjoy seeing students' personal style confidence developing over the three years and the stylistic directions they embrace – although this can still prove a poor indicator of the shoe selections chosen to finally cross the stage in for Graduation!

R2:

Hi R1

Here's another one,.. I'm enjoying the musings.... I could go on....and on.....

Glamour, the artisan and modern style (1920s – 1950)

Once I'm in to the C20th I always feel it's the home straight, particularly after WW2, but there's a surprising amount of history between now and then! I've rejigged this period in the lectures since leaving BCU several times as I've added much more fashion, but also needed to add / remove lectures some years – I think I'm settled on 9 x 1hour lectures plus an intro... but things can and will change in time. Are you at 10 lectures, and how long do you have each session?

I'm keen to ask the students to challenge their perceptions in all aspects, in a safe space when getting confused can be okay. This lecture helps with this. Gender in design was something I don't recall being included in my own degree education, but I don't see how we can leave it to one side anymore. I look at the designers I was made aware of in my undergraduate study, mostly white men, and anything domestic was seen secondary. I've tried hard to add balance and call out the male bias but as history recorded opportunities for more men than women it is incredibly hard. Designers such as Althea McNish [1924-2022] and Sheila Bownas [1925-2007] are two good examples of rediscovered designers but not only have we not got full records of designs by females, think of all the individual talented women who were not even *allowed* to lead design careers and afforded the same opportunities their male counterparts had.

With over 90% of each cohort female, it can be empowering to identify progress as well as continuing poor practice. I discuss the role women play, frequently since the 1930s as anonymous freelance designers, or part time studio designers, juggling home and working life. These magazines on the slide are useful to illustrate the image women were encouraged to strive for, teaching women how to make textile items for their homes, (but be careful not to show too much individual style!) be thrifty and at the same time glamorous, and we can soon realise the contemporary media of online platforms continue to reinforce similar messages. Thinking this through for next year, I'll ask students to consider their relationship with media and if they can identify pressure or propaganda. I'll let you know how it goes!

Of course, there are positives with online communities. The pandemic saw the use of social media to share crafting practices grow play a vital role in connecting and building supportive networks. As financial pressures and the cost-of-living increase, thrifty living is required again. Make do and Mend strategies, crafting social support groups, putting on another jumper.... These recurring themes demonstrate to students the cyclical nature of societal changes, and how embedding craft and

design in our everyday lives provides solutions, both personally and collectively, as well as how we can learn and take comfort from the past – very neo-classical... and as an aside, it's no chance columns, doves, olive branches and urns became popular motifs in the 1930s too!

I've thrown lots of different issues at this one, but it is usually well-received. Where are you taking me next?

R2:

Hi R1, I have a feeling we may continue to muse over these lectures for some years despite meeting the FTC deadline!

I've thoroughly enjoyed being made to consider the lectures in a more contemporary light, considering how to engage our respective communities and respond to your musings. I feel energised going into the new academic year, thanks!

Taking time to invest in our own development always benefits the students in some form.

As you said on the 'phone, we must be careful not to muddy the message to the first years with too much present day thinking when it's a design history series but bringing a contemporary relevance to the history lectures should help the students critical studio practice too. I love your drawing exercises.

What will you take from this process?

See you in Leeds... R2

R1:

I'll be looking to find space for musings like these with the students this year. I'm also going to think about how collections can be used more to help build critical skills. I've found these exchanges stimulating and enriching too! The way our personal practices feed into the lectures illustrates to students how relevant historical understanding is. I'm sure being practitioner/academics helps us connect the dots. We need our students to be keen and confident in engaging with archives and with the curiosity to find out more from the amazing museums and heritage sites we have. I hope this trail of ours can support others within our academic community delivering similar content. See you in Leeds!

END

Figure list & captions:

Fig. 1 Chita Hybrida, 2020 collaboration by David Elia and Zoë Hillyard, photo credit: Boriana Goranova

Fig. 2 H&M shirt and label, photo credit: Kate Farley

Fig. 3 Building exterior featuring Dispatchwork by Jan Vormann, Rouen, France, photo credit: Kate Farley

Fig. 4 Student drawings inspired by the Art Deco aesthetic / car boot sale goods, photo credit: Zoë Hillyard

Fig. 5 Clarice Cliff ceramics, photo credit: Kate Farley

Fig. 6 Ornamental frog collection, photo credit: Kate Farley

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Kate Farley is a print and pattern designer and Associate Professor at Norwich University of the Arts, currently Course Leader of BA Textile Design, and Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. With an interest in visual communication through pattern, and brand identity conveyed within bespoke design, Kate has undertaken commissions for clients including Transport for London, David Mellor Design Ltd, Barbican Centre, Birmingham Airport and Stamp and Diary, Japan. Own brand collections have included surface design for giftware and home interiors products manufactured in Britain. Kate's book, Repeat Pattern for Interiors, will be published by Bloomsbury in January 2023

Zoë Hillyard

Zoë Hillyard has a background in textile design, fashion knitwear and volunteering. She is currently Course Director for BA(Hons) Textile Design within the Institute of Jewellery, Fashion and Textiles at Birmingham City University and is Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Zoë is an established craft practitioner known for cross-disciplinary work that re-contextualises existing materials and promotes discussion about contemporary relationships with possessions and resources. She is represented by CAA Gallery in London and is a Member of Society of Designer Craftsmen. Education and practice both inform her research interests in material innovation, circular design and community resilience. She thrives on cultural exchange and collaboration, highly valuing the international relationships she maintains.