

## 'IT LOOKS VERY HOME DRESS-MAKEY'

STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE FASHION DESIGN STUDENTS TO REALISE A  
PROFESSIONALLY FINISHED GARMENT: CUT, CONSTRUCTION, FABRIC, COLOUR

DRESSMADE | GARMENT | PROFESSIONAL | FINISH | DESIGN | COLOUR



### INTRODUCTION

'IT LOOKS VERY HOME DRESS-MAKEY' IS A TERM OFTEN LEVELLED AT STUDENTS DURING TOILE AND GARMENT FITTINGS. INTERPRETED IT MEANS THAT THE GARMENT HAS BEEN CUT AND MANUFACTURED IN A WAY THAT LOOKS HOME DRESS MADE AS OPPOSED TO PROFESSIONALLY FINISHED.

The phrase also implies that the student's work is poor and that a garment that looks home dress made, in fashion terms is amateurish. The process of teaching and learning that enables students to grasp this concept is intricate. It includes developing an appreciation of what constitutes good and bad design and an empathy for the most appropriate technical methods in order to professionally realise the design.



## RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

This paper is a reflective investigation and celebration of the activities involved in making clothes and suggests ways in which to instil a passion for this technology in fashion students. It explores teaching strategies that enable final year fashion design students to successfully realise their degree collections. It also examines the work of Jean Muir, a designer who;

*'Was in love with the process and craft of dressmaking and always used very high quality materials and details.'*

*Soutar, 2008 p2*

The example of Jean Muir's work is used as a catalyst to discuss the educational processes developed in order to teach students about professional garments. She was a designer who had a passion to improve technical skills and standards in design education, as she said;

*'The things most dear to me are art and craft and design and the upholding of standards and quality, maintaining them and setting new ones.'*

*Semp S, 2006 p6*

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

What does home dress made mean and what does a home dress made garment actually look like? Fundamentally it's a garment, made at home by an amateur dress maker. Professional garments are produced by

trained designers and technicians. It needs to be acknowledged that some home dressmakers have acquired highly professional skills and many designers have used outworkers, who work from home to manufacture their production. This paper does not refer to this. When the term 'It looks very home dress-makey', is levelled at a student it implies that the garment is badly and inaccurately cut. The proportions of the garment can be poorly considered, and it can be shoddily made and lack flair and fashion in its interpretation. Its harmony, in use of colour and fabric can be poor.

Dressmaking or the manufacture of garments is taken very seriously in the fashion department at University of Huddersfield. The pedagogic approach is to emphasise craft, technique and making. The first year focuses upon the traditional, through a series of exercises that teach students how to use machinery and to sew. Flat pattern making is introduced and accurate design interpretation is encouraged; the year culminates with all students producing a separates collection. The second year focuses on two different technical approaches. Students study a module in tailoring (figure 1). This develops an understanding of the construction techniques that need to be mastered in order to create a structured, tailored garment. The students also study a module in 'Moulage' or draping on the stand (figure 2). This module encourages students to manipulate fabric on the

stand in a creative way. A pattern is then made from the manipulated fabric pieces. By final year the students have experienced a variety of dressmaking and tailoring techniques that prepare them for embarking on the production of their degree collections.

Cementing technical understanding into final year undergraduate students about to embark on the production of their first collection is crucial and it's essential that they appreciate what constitutes a poorly constructed garment. At final year level it is important to revisit the basics and encourage a zeal and enthusiasm for cut. The mysteries of pattern cutting need to be diffused and made to appear accessible. It's usually only a few who claim to enjoy pattern cutting. The general moan from most is;

*'I hate pattern cutting.'*

### General student quote

This perceived 'hatred' needs to be fuelled into a passionate enthusiasm. Most prospective students declare a passion for fashion as being the main reason for choosing it as a career, however many reach a stumbling block when it comes to technology. It is perceived as difficult and boring. This then becomes the real challenge to the lecturer. How to really channel the student's initial enthusiasm for fashion, into a love of pattern cutting and garment manufacture and how to convince them that this is an essential part of the creative process.

A sense of craft needs to be



understood. Interestingly Jean Muir preferred to be known as a dressmaker, not a fashion designer. Her definition of the word fashion was to make, implying craft, she said,

*'In dressmaking the design has to be made to wear, to fit, to be comfortable, to last, to be attractive, to enhance and most of all to work on a body. Fashion is a very serious craft and an important one.'*

*Semp S, 2006 p59*

Students need to explore as many pattern cutting techniques as possible to achieve their shapes. It is important that they can feel comfortable with their approach. To reiterate this in final year it's sensible to revisit the basics of flat pattern cutting, draping, body sizing and tolerance and to emphasise dart manipulation, collars, sleeves etc. It's also important to consider relevant pattern cutting books. Students need to recognise that the book will not necessarily give them the answer they want, which

can frustrating. Fundamentally they are there as guides and inspiration. It has to be emphasised that they have to experiment, try different ways of doing things and really work through a problem in order to achieve a result. As designer Andrew Flonda said in a British Fashion Council interview,

*'Pattern cutting is not rocket science, a methodical mind and common sense married with the ground rules of pattern cutting is all you need as a starting point to create innovative and ground breaking patterns.'*

*Flonda, 2000, British Fashion Council Interview*

Jean Muir evolved a formulaic approach to the technical development of a collection. She was;

*'Never concerned with ideas, much more the cut and the craft – how something was made.'*

*Semp S, 2006 p68*

Every part of the process was precise

and systematic. She was not a designer who believed in mistakes or sloppiness. Jean Muir also ensured that she fitted the clothes by trying them on herself. She needed to feel a garment on her own body before approving it. The plum coloured leather jacket in figure 3 and figure 4 is a great example of Jean Muir's attention to detail. The precise placing of the top stitching has been mathematically worked out, as has the pleating in the sleeve and jacket. This is also reflected in the position of the punctured design on the sleeve in figure 4 and in the positioning of the smocking stitches on the turquoise jacket in figure 5.

Fit checks or the trying on of the garment are an integral part of the manufacture process as the garments ultimate destination is to be worn on the figure. Final year students are given clear and precise instructions on how to present both a toile and a garment at a fitting. It's a formula that needs to be followed in order to ensure that the creativity and flair in



## WHEN THE TERM 'IT LOOKS VERY HOME DRESS-MAKEY', IS LEVELLED AT A STUDENT IT IMPLIES THAT THE GARMENT IS BADLY AND INACCURATELY CUT



Proportions can be altered and refined. Do pocket shapes or collar shapes work together, are the hemlines correct, does the silhouette balance throughout the collection? Ultimately does the range communicate a cohesive visual message that has style, flair and is suitable for market? It is a time to really question the body of work; the tutor needs to be critical to encourage the student's own analysis and understanding.

The finished clothes also benefit from a final fit check (figure 8), garments:

*'Need checking on a body because there is such a clear benchmark as to how these styles should hang and fit.'*

**Jenkyn Jones S, 2002 p131**

Fastenings can be tested, sewing improvements identified. The model can check they can move in the garment, drape and hang of fabric can be ensured, shoulder pads, hem lines etc, can be adjusted. Use of fabric, colour and texture can be considered.

Deconstructing a garment is a great way to discover how it is constructed. Reconstructing it into another garment, encourages the student to subvert traditional craft and technology processes in order to gain a greater understanding of them. It is also a great loosening up exercise for final year students and encourages them to think about pattern cutting in a creative way. Students have to turn garments upside down or inside out, or unpick them and reassemble them in order to develop new and challenging

designs. In the example in figure 9, the student, Lauren Montgomery has deconstructed a grey leather jacket. She has made the sleeves into the legs and draped the rest of the garment around the crutch to create a pouched effect. The finished garment developed from this method is observed in figure 10. Lauren has constructed a pattern from her deconstructed garment and re-made it in the latex fabrics seen. Jean Muir did not use such revolutionary design techniques. She was an evolutionary designer who developed her craft through learning about it on the shop floor. This helped her gain the technical expertise, strict attention to detail and precision cut and fit, for which she became famous. Students are encouraged to find designer garments for the deconstruction project. If the student had the opportunity to reassemble a Jean Muir dress and reconstruct it, it would provide an insight into her craft and a learning opportunity about her technique. Consider the examples of the garments in figures 11 and 12. The inside of the garments display the careful thought given to finish. The shoulder pad in figure 11 is covered in crepe and its edges have been pinked. This is less bulky than over locking. Similarly the seams in figure 12 are pinked for the same reason.

Commenting on individual skills Jean Muir observed;

*'the way the girls push the cloth through the sewing machine and how they know what the cloth has got to do and when to hold it tighter*

*or when to stretch it slightly. And it's innate in their fingers and I think it is something we need to appreciate infinitely more in this country – all the wonderful skills.'*

**Semp S, 2006 p 83**

These observations emphasise the importance in developing knowledge of fabric and how to handle it. Students need to educate themselves about the inherent properties of fabric. Testing it for stretch or shrinkage, tension of needle, drape etc. Most importantly students need to study how fabric has been used in the design and make of clothes, how it hangs and what it will or will not do, as Jean Muir said;

*'One must use materials with the respect they're due. It doesn't matter if its knitted cashmere or a beautiful piece of woven British Wool, you must treat them with respect.'*

**Semp S, 2006 p, 74**

Examining a wide variety of fashion garments develops an understanding of fabric and its handle. This can be achieved by encouraging students to visit important fashion stores in order to scrutinise designer clothes, or to visit archived collections of garments such as the Costume Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. As well as handle garments need to be tried on in order to understand how they work with and react to the body; what sort of fabric has a sensuous drape, what sort of fabric is stiff and holds its shape, what does the designer need to apply to the fabric as in tailoring, to give it body and shape?

Jean Muir used fabrics that reacted with the naturalness of the body. Supple fabrics, such as crepe, soft suede and jersey. She designed for a body that moved and came in different shapes and sizes, not for an idealised form that needed structural underpinnings.

Jean Muir's particular approach to making clothes is often embraced wholeheartedly by some students, who either consciously or unconsciously emulate both her style and technique. Other students reject her approach either through their admiration of another designers work, or through their exploration of new developments in garment technology. Many fashion students consider the practice of dressmaking an old fashioned concept and adopt terms such as: tailored, constructed or fashioned when producing garments. The term 'fashion designer' is relatively modern and conjures up the glamorous concept of a star designer. Before the advent of this phenomena, much fashionable clothing was produced by a 'dressmaker', who designed and produced wardrobes for their clients. The 'process and craft of dressmaking' (Soutar, 2008, p2) that Jean Muir advocated was a respected technology. An examination of two different fashion students' collections from University of Huddersfield from 2009, demonstrates

clear and contrasting examples. The 'Very Jean Muir' approach in figure 13 demonstrates an adherence to the stylish, intelligent and womanly customer that Jean Muir designed for. In luxurious fabrics, figure 13 has used the supple, draped fabrics of Jean Muir that react to the body. The outfit suggests a respect for the fabrics used and the classic traditions of dressmaking. In contrast the 'Not very Jean Muir' outfit in figure 14 rebels against the designer's dictates. The corseted 'Marie Antoinette' dress is tortured and constricts the body, the multitude of ruffles are raw edged and unfinished.

The understanding and application of colour is a skill that student designers need to perfect. Students will often select a colour palette, but make colour blind decisions when rendering the colour in a fashion sketch. At design critiques, the tutor will for instance ask the student why they have illustrated their design in a particular shade of blue, when their

developing the garment, fits the body accurately and the final pattern can be developed. The toile is a prototype of the garment often made in a cheap fabric or a rough calico, the term, 'It looks very home dress-makey', can be applied to a toile if it isn't presented in this formulaic and professional way. The example of a Charles James toile in the Victoria and Albert Museum archives figure 6, is an example of how a perfect toile should be presented, note the balance lines and the centre front marked accurately in red pen.

It's important that students show toiles for a collection in a line up (figure 7). This is the only way the harmony and balance of the range can be ensured.





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fabric swatch is a completely different shade. Amazingly, until this is pointed out the student does not realise their mistake. A study of the use of colour in Jean Muir's work demonstrates her tenacious discipline to its use in her collections.

Jean Muir is famous for her use of sober colours such as grey, inky navy and black.

Her signature was her little black and navy jersey dresses. Either simply cut or complex, both flared and moved with the body. The simple dress from The Leeds City Council collection archives, figure 15 is essentially a square of fabric with a central hole for the head to go through. When layed out flat, as in figure 16 it looks like a piece of black cloth, yet when held up on a dress hanger as in figure 15 it falls into elegant and sinuous drapes. The other version observed is the classic Jersey dress in inky blue (figure 17) and (figure 18) with contrasting topstitching detail on the collar and cuffs.

Fashion students at University of Huddersfield students are encouraged to be exacting and critical so that they develop the confidence to make their own design and technical decisions. An obsession with the make of clothes as well as their design is encouraged. The technical staff have an important role to play.

Some of the technicians act as pattern or tailoring demonstrators and can impart much fundamental knowledge and skill. The role of the academic is to inspire innovation in technical and design aesthetics. The ultimate aim is to produce exciting, innovative and forward thinking fashion garments, with roots that are solidly entrenched in the traditions of dressmaking.

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The British Fashion Council recently produced a film called 'Inspirational Pattern Cutting'. The intention was to encourage students to consider a career in pattern cutting. It includes interviews with designers and demonstrations of creative pattern cutting from the design duo Pierce Fionda. Michael Tierry, Design Director of the Dewhirst Group who is interviewed in the film said;

*'We're producing brilliant designers but we are not producing enough creative technical people and this is what the industry and not just the British industry but internationally is crying out for.'*

**Tierry, 2000, British Fashion Council Interview**

Skillfast the UK Government sponsored initiative to develop skills in trade, industry and education are trying to address this. They have recently been

meeting with educationalists on fashion courses to investigate ways of working together to develop fashion curricula that incorporate more traditional and innovative technical skills.

This is something Jean Muir always advocated, she regarded herself as a:

*'Dressmaker pursuing her craft not a flighty fashion designer.'*

**Fisher M, 2008 p2**

The conclusions to be drawn are that by studying the work methods of a particular designer it provides a mechanism for understanding the professional manufacture processes in creating fashion garments and collections. Hilary Hollingworth, emphasised this in her MA Dissertation 'Creative Pattern Cutting',

*'A good project for introducing students to design concepts is one where they choose a designer, research that designer fully, history, philosophy, detailing, fabrics, illustration, style, cut make and presentation. The student then designs and draws up and makes the pattern for make up, in the style of that designer – in this project the student goes through all the design process and by tracing the steps of a designer, becoming absorbed in that persons work, the anxiety of how to start is removed*

*and because of the good example, the quality of the design and the garment are improved.'*

**Hilary Hollingworth, 1996 p55**

Jean Muir believed in craft and an engineered approach to dressmaking skills. She was precise and idiosyncratic with a no nonsense approach. She demanded perfection and had a design vision through which her collections evolved gradually. A study of other designer's work methods would reveal their different approaches, a designer such as Vivienne Westwood seeks to subvert and innovate, and a John Galliano pursues a historically romanticised vision. They work with garment technicians in a way that is far less exacting but no less creative than Jean Muir. Acquiring this in depth understanding and empathy for a designers work methods and technique, provides a platform for final year students to develop their own skills and technique in relation to their own work. In so doing the teaching and learning between tutor and student synthesises in an enlightened educational environment.

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### NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

The Scotsman, Friday 28th November 2008, Jean Muir Exhibition, Gaby Soutar.

The List, 30th October 2008, Absolutely Fabulous Jean Muir, Mark Fisher.

### WEB SITES

Irenebrination, 2008, Notes on Art, Fashion and Style, Jean Muir, dressmaker extraordinaire, irenebrination.typepad.com

### STUDENT PROJECT HANDBOOK

Almond, K. Student Project Handbook Final Year, 2008.

### STUDENT PROJECT

Deconstruct to Reconstruct 2009, using the work of Lauren Montgomery.

### FILMS

Inspirational Pattern Cutting, British Fashion Council, 2000.

Very Jean Muir, Channel 4, 1994.

### COSTUME COLLECTIONS VIEWED

Victoria and Albert Museum Costume Collection – Antonia Brodie.

Leeds Museums and Galleries Costume Collection – Nathalie Raw.

### ILLUSTRATIONS

Second Year Tailored outfit, 2009 – University of Huddersfield, figure (1).

Second Year Moulage garment, 2009 – University of Huddersfield, figure (2).

Jean Muir, purple jacket, 1980 – LEEAG T193, Leeds Museums and Galleries, figures (3) and (4).

Jean Muir turquoise jacket, 1980 – LEEAG 1975.63.3, Leeds Museums and Galleries, figure (5).

Charles James toile, 1974 – T-20-1980, Victoria and Albert Museum, figure (6).

Yeung Cheung, toile line up, 2009 – University of Huddersfield, figure (7).

Lauren Montgomery, collection line up, 2009 – University of Huddersfield, figure (8).

Lauren Montgomery, Deconstructed garment, University of Huddersfield, 2008 (figure 9).

Lauren Montgomery, Deconstructed garment, University of Huddersfield, 2008 (figures 10).

Jean Muir jacket, 1980 – LEEAG 1999.0013, Leeds Museums and Galleries, figure (11).

Jean Muir wool dress, 1980 – LEEAG T.310, Leeds Museums and Galleries, figure (12).

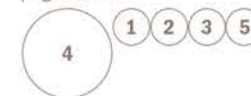
Rachel Vickers, final collection outfit, 2009 – University of Huddersfield, figure (13).

Marian Campbell, final collection outfit, 2009 – University of Huddersfield, figure (14).

Jean Muir black dress, 1980 – LEEAG 1976.12, Leeds Museums and Galleries, figures (15) and (16).

Jean Muir dress, 1980 – LEEAG.1975.0063.0001, Leeds Museums and Galleries, figures (17) and (18).

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