

FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

Hidden Gems

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Abstract

In this Arts Council funded collaborative project, university academics worked with fashion designers, textile artists, a scarf stylist, makeup artist and photographer, to inspire mothers and daughters from the local Asian community to create original designs, interpreting a small selection of the Asian textiles from the Gawthorpe Textiles Collection, Padiham, United Kingdom (UK). The collection is an important repository of textile artefacts that symbolises the significance of the textile heritage of Lancashire. Our main aim was to uncover hidden gems from the textile collection and from the local community.

The process of drawing, colouration and computer-aided design (CAD) design culminated in contemporary digital scarf designs. Scarves are something this group of women wear every day, so the choice of the hijab or headscarf as a vehicle for the creative expression of our project was always very important to us because of its cultural significance and therefore bore greater personal relevance to the participants. The way you wear your hijab says as much about a Muslim woman as the way you style your hair says about a westernised woman. The title Hidden Gems also makes an oblique reference to the ongoing debate about modesty within fashion, which has evolved to become an important cultural and economic force over recent decades. Modest clothing is now an international symbol for inclusion and empowerment for women across cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries with the hijab being the most recognisable symbol of modesty.

Our project culminates in photographic portraits showing each participant wearing their own scarf design in the library at Gawthorpe Hall. The portraits speak of layers of meaning, emotions, identity and image. These images transcend time and culture, powerfully creating a bridge between tradition and modernity. The project has been a catalyst for cultural engagement reaching out to new audiences engaging with the collection.

Keywords: community; heritage; hijab; engagement; modest fashion

Introduction

This paper will describe the Hidden Gems project, a collaboration between members of the Fashion and Textiles department at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and the Gawthorpe Textiles Collection (GTC) which ran from March to August 2018. Planning for the project began in 2017 and involved liaison with GTC and application to the Arts Council for support, which secured funding of just under £15,000 to undertake the project. Workshops and study days took place through March and April, followed by the printing of the scarves, the photoshoot, the design of the catalogue and ultimately the exhibition in July and August. The aim of the project was to develop new perspectives and

interpretations of the collection and to share the extensive textile samples with a wider audience. The GTC is a significant repository of textile artefacts that symbolises the significance of the textile heritage of Lancashire. Although the collection is widely known in the national and international textile world, it is mostly unknown in the local area in Burnley and East Lancashire, especially amongst the Asian community. The Director and trustees of GTC are all too aware that the textile collection must grow and move forward but this relies on engagement with younger generations and a wider range of the general population who will keep the collection alive and bring in forward thinking techniques and methodologies. Ideally, the collection would hold a stronger role in community driven heritage engagement (Perkin 2009). However, it was recognised that engagement driven by the community cannot happen if they have no awareness of the collection. This project aimed to begin the process of engagement to enable future community driven activity.

The project enabled us to engage with the local community and hard to reach groups around Burnley. Our programme aimed to engage with an intergenerational group of Asian women in artist-led workshops, supported by academics and curators from the collection, to utilise a selection of rare textiles pieces from the 30,000 samples held within the GTC. The local Asian community includes mothers with under-valued textile skills; ambitions remain unexpressed until their children gain independence. We were interested in how an inter-generational synergy would work between mothers and daughters on a creative project like this with varying knowledge of techniques and historical referencing of Asian patterning. One aim of the project was to discover some 'hidden gems' amongst the participants who might recognise the value of their knowledge and skills through their involvement. The workshops aimed to inspire reinterpretation of the collection; working directly from the artefacts, this mixed generational group were helped to produce artwork to inform digital prints. We wanted to explore the link between textile heritage and community integration, combined with connotations of modest fashion within local Asian communities and interpretations of modest styling. Could these all work together to provide a positive creative experience and a new link between this specific community and the GTC?

Background

The GTC was founded by expert lace maker and embroiderer, Rachel Kay-Shuttleworth (1886-1967). She was a philanthropist who dedicated her life to making changes to the situation of people in the communities in her local area (Dugan 2007). She valued the wellbeing benefits of creative activity and was concerned about the erosion of craft skills that she witnessed in industrial Burnley. Shuttleworth was influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement, which encouraged the revival of traditional craft skills in contrast to mass production at the turn of the twentieth century. Her vision from an early age was to create a 'craft house', a place of learning where traditional craft skills were kept alive. This interest fuelled a lifelong passion for collecting textiles from around the world to become learning resources. The collection was accumulated not through wealth, but through her travels, her family and her social connections. The collection of over 30,000 samples is one of the most interesting specialist textile collections in the UK and has a strong focus on techniques and craft skill. (<https://www.gawthorpetextiles.org.uk/about>) Shuttleworth was not interested in the artefacts as such but in the craft skill that they represented so much so that she was known to cut up samples to share with other collectors or, if the sample showed different techniques, to catalogue both techniques in different places in her collection. For example, you might find half of one piece of cloth in a box labelled Indian embroidery and the other half under the label Kantha stitch.

Originally gathered to preserve examples of textile craft techniques for future generations, the primary aim of the collection is educational so in devising the project it was important to inform and edify as

well as inspire. For a textiles fanatic every encounter with the collection is like a visit to the sweetie shop. The range of fabrics, techniques, materials and cultures that it represents is hard to quantify or evaluate. We want to promote and expose this rich archive of ideas to as many people as possible. Recognising the potential for the collection to be a bridge between tradition and the future, we took inspiration from a small section of the collection for this project – items of surface decoration from the countries of South Asia – to produce contemporary digital textiles. Working from traditional decorative motifs and patterns, our participants and artists created designs for digitally printed scarves or hijabs.

The Artists

We worked with several other artists and designers to realise this project. There were four artists who worked with the participants to translate and interpret the patterns from the artefacts in the collection into digital designs. Lisa Scarlett Ryan has experience of running community-based textile workshops. Ryan developed print designs with the groups, encouraging experimental use of media and exploring colour combinations, she was instrumental in translating the paper designs into Photoshop files for digital printing. Modest fashion designer Femida Adam, with a successful business Al-Aura, and as an experienced lecturer, encouraged links to the traditional design processes. Zareen Wahid has a degree in Eastern Fashion Design and an MA in International Fashion Design. She had worked closely with GTC in the past and used this knowledge and her experience in commercial digital print design to encourage creativity and to pass on her technical knowledge. Fashion and textile artist, Louise Duxbury runs a successful business running an art studio franchise that offers art and textile workshops. She encouraged an experimental approach to the translation of historical artefacts from the collection into print design.

The Participants

Requests to participate were sent by email to schools and community groups with explicit invitations to girls to bring their mothers or for mothers to bring their daughters. Help was enlisted from the university community liaison team, the local arts officer and the exhibition venue, which is a community arts centre. Contact was also made by word of mouth through existing community contacts of the artists, and women began to inform each other about the project. Participants were required to complete an informed consent form (signed by a parent or guardian for participants under the age of consent). All information about the project specified that participation was limited to females. Most participants were Muslim but not all. Although the aim was to work with mothers and daughters, this was not possible in all cases due to work and other commitments. However, girls from this community group are often required to be chaperoned and this led to other family groupings, such as aunts and nieces and sibling groups accompanied by an older sister. Due to space considerations the number of participants was limited to thirty. Twenty-five people began the project, but only twenty-three completed the whole project including the photo shoot and were featured in the final exhibition and exhibition catalogue.

The Process

An important part of the project was the aim to get the participants to Gawthorpe Hall to see the collection. However, this proved to be even more difficult than we had expected. The project had been developed because many members of the local population do not visit the Hall and we discovered that there was strong resistance to do so even for a free study day. Transport was provided from Burnley (three miles away) for any participants who needed it but this was not successful. Only one participant arrived for the first session at the Hall. More came to the next session but they reported great difficulty in finding the location. Additional study days were organised until a good cross section of the group had spent time with the collection.

The study days took place in the library of the Hall, which contains the considerable archive of textile textbooks and books of the Shuttleworth-Kay family history. Participants found it inspiring to spend time looking at the artefacts in the place where the collection was conceived. Participants and facilitators made initial sketches, photographed. They looked at traditional Indian block prints, batik, embroideries, florals, paisleys, and borders. Many of the older participants recognised the techniques in the samples and were familiar with the patterns we showed them.

Workshops took place at the university campus in the centre of Burnley. This was more easily accessible for the participants and allowed for greater freedom of creative activity (paints and pens are not allowed in the GTC library). Participants were encouraged to develop motifs and patterns from the sketches and photographs of the collection previously made at the study days. These were then scanned into the computer and developed in Photoshop to create final digital designs for scarves.

Although some of the adult participants had not drawn for many years they demonstrated dexterity and skill at drawing the intricate patterns because many of them are involved in mehndi or henna painting in which the traditional patterns are similar. The younger participants particularly enjoyed the digital design stage of the process even though this was a new skill for most of them. Many of the older participants found this more challenging but they helped each other, and the four artists assisted them to interpret their ideas into simple designs for scarves.

The designs were digitally printed onto cotton muslin because this would be most suitable to be styled in different ways and to be worn as a hijab. All participants were invited to attend a photo shoot at Gawthorpe Hall where they saw their finished scarves for the first time. This was another opportunity to get the participants to visit the Hall and become familiar with that space. The photo shoot is a standard part of the fashion process and was key to the success of this project. Participants were photographed wearing their scarves, which had been styled by professional scarf stylist, Yasmin Taju. Initially some participants were shy and self-conscious. Make-up artist, Humairah Zaman, enhanced the natural beauty of the girls and women and helped them to relax. The aim of the resulting photographs was to celebrate and embrace the hijab as a symbol of the Muslim faith, the modesty of this group of women and to reclaim their pride in the scarf as a fashion choice (Sandiker and Ger 2008).

Cultural Context

The choice of the hijab or headscarf as a vehicle for the creative expression of our project had cultural significance. Generation M (Muslim Millennials) are determined to show their value to communities and as consumers. It is estimated that by 2050 a quarter of the world's population will be Muslim, yet this demographic feels undervalued and underrepresented particularly in the fashion industry (Janmohamed 2016).

Although there are various reasons for wearing headscarves, the practice of wearing headscarves against inclement weather or for adornment has all but disappeared in Western Europe in the last 50 years. Old images of textile workers leaving the English cotton mills wearing distinctive shawls or headwear in the early 1900's (Toulmin 2006) show similarities to the groups of young Muslim women we see on the streets of Burnley today.

Modest fashion has evolved to become an important cultural and economic force over recent decades. Asian fashion bloggers show how Asian women can dress modestly and still be fashionable. Designers include modest styling on the catwalk and even high street labels feature models wearing headscarves

meaning that modest clothing is now, for some women, an international symbol for inclusion and empowerment across cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries. Even so the wearing of the headscarf is vilified by some sections of the community and is seen as a symbol of oppression and seclusion. We wanted to celebrate the positive view of hijab-wearing and overcome the negative impression.

The art of scarf styling is important. One of the participants wrote in her feedback: 'I typically style my scarf depending on my mood and outfit. It's second nature, my second skin'. There are many ways to style a hijab. At one of the study days, each of the eight women in the room wore their scarves in a different style. The way you wear your hijab says as much about a Muslim woman as the way you style your hair says about a westernised woman. The scarf is an outlet of cultural expression. Like Grace Ndiritu's film, *The Nightingale*. (Ndiritu 2003) 'This modest piece of fabric is invested with a great deal of personal meaning' (La Gamma and Giuntini 2008 page 19). Modest fashion, contrary to general assumption is as diverse and subject to trends and micro trends as any other part of the fashion industry. Femida Adam, one of the artists, commented, 'To me the scarf is the most beautiful wrap invented for the body. It's not just about faith – it's effortless winding, continuity in dignity and infinity. Wearing a headscarf brings out inner beauty and is a statement piece that can liven up any attire!'

Photo shoot

Alex Hurst created the photographic portraits for the project. Alex is a freelance commercial photographer specialising in portraiture as well as being a part-time lecturer working with Fashion Styling students at UCLan. Social cohesion is an extremely important issue for Alex, and noted that the opportunity to contribute to this inclusive project was particularly exciting. Alex took the photographs in the Hall library, which has retained the original wallpaper dating back to the 1870's featuring panels edged in leather. Providing a 'perfect backdrop', the hall aided the creation of regal-like images of the women and children and complimented the patterned headscarf designs. Five of the final portraits are shown in figures 1 to 5. For many of the women this was the first time they had experienced having a scarf styled and many had never worn make-up.



*Figure 1: Portrait of Sara Touhami who said:
'This has made me think of my scarf as more than just function, it can be so much more.'*



*Figure 2: Portrait of Sameira Amir who attended with her daughter said:
'I've made some amazing memories with my daughter.'*



Figure 3: Portrait of Amina Butt.



Figure 4: Portrait of Hamera Bashir who also attended with her daughter.



Figure 5: Portrait of Ateeqa Abbas.

Reminiscent of the evocative mid-twentieth century pictures of Malian photographer, Syedou Keita, the portraits speak of layers of meaning, emotions, identity and image. Like Keita's 'Portrait of a Woman' or 'Olympia', these images transcend time and culture, powerfully creating a bridge between tradition and modernity (La Gamma and Giuntini 2008).

Some women found the photo shoot to be an emotional occasion. Although many of the women were nervous at having their portraits taken, they supported each other and there was great camaraderie

on the day. Many participants commented on how much they had enjoyed meeting new friends, getting together and being creative.

The Exhibitions, Catalogue and Public Engagement

Although the project only had direct impact on the participants and the artists, there was wider community engagement through participation in the National Festival of Making in Blackburn (12th and 13th May 2018) where we previewed the Hidden Gems exhibition and ran a headscarf styling workshop for members of the public.

The main exhibition was held from 9th July to 8th August 2018 in the gallery at Burnley Mechanics, a multipurpose arts venue in the centre of Burnley. This venue was chosen in order to reach out to a different audience than would typically visit exhibitions at Gawthorpe Hall or in standard gallery spaces. This project was all about 'real people' and we wanted the people who frequented the bars, café and theatre to see the remarkable beauty and powerful images of these local Asian women and children. We were aware that the regular audiences of this arts centre were typically white working class, local people, yet we did not know that there was a special music event of traditional Sufi music from Arabic, Andalusia and Turkish sources to be held there when Hidden Gems was on display. The event was organised by the Free Spiritual Centre who aim to promote an understanding of Sufism and Islamic mysticism within the community. Feedback from the Arts Officer at Burnley Mechanics said that their Sufi visitors loved the exhibition and felt very welcomed into the building because of it. At least 400 people attended the Sufi event and visitor numbers to the venue for duration of the exhibition were about 1750. The exhibition comprised the portraits, the scarves, photographs of the pieces from the collection that inspired the scarves, and images depicting the design process and the workshops.

The quality of the catalogue was to be an important legacy, documenting the work the contributors had put into creating the scarves, it was a significant achievement for them, notably for the older women coming out of their comfort zone to allow us to style and photograph them. We worked closely with the graphic designer to create a contemporary 'book' with a strong fashion-feel yet encapsulating the strong message of female empowerment and camaraderie. It included a portrait of each participant as well as more images of the process from beginning to end. Many of the younger participants took many books to pass around, as they felt famous! We wanted them to share their experience with their families and friends, as this was a way to reach out to more people.

Conclusion

Participants reacted positively to the collection. One wrote in her feedback: 'The Gawthorpe Textiles Collection was so exciting, it really spoke to me. I was instantly inspired by a certain piece, it jumped out at me. I've made some amazing memories with my daughter.' Her daughter said, 'I usually only wear a scarf to the mosque, I'm definitely going start wearing them more.' Another participant fed back, 'I didn't know what to expect from the project, but it has been a passionate journey for me, from start to finish.'

The choice to create a scarf or hijab within the workshops was deliberate and considered. It signified inclusion and acceptance and the opportunity to share knowledge and skills. As university academics, artists and designers we could be viewed as elitist and 'expert' but our expert knowledge is around idea development, creativity and design. The participants taught us about the design requirements of scarf design, borders, pattern placement and colour. We learned from each other. Participants reported feeling inspired and more creative as a result of the activity: 'I'm so proud of myself, and it's

been great to do something different and be more creative.’ And ‘My creative side has really been re-ignited by this project. It’s so inspiring seeing women coming together.’

The choice of the scarf or hijab also enabled the opportunity for another significant outcome: the photographic portraits of each participant wearing their headscarf. Using a Fashion approach to this activity was significant, the photographs were carefully posed, and the participants were styled and made up professionally. The process was noted as transformative and transforming for participants. This proved to be a significant part of the experience for them, ‘I loved the photo shoot and having my scarf styled, it gave me lots of new ideas.’ Another commented, ‘This has made me think of my scarf as more than just function, it can be so much more.’

We did find a hidden gem amongst the participants who came along with her daughter (Figure 4). Although she was not confident in her drawing or design skills, she painstakingly drew out her design and manipulated it on the screen to achieve her final design. She had never worn make-up or had her scarf styled before. For her the photo shoot was particularly significant. The journey she went on through this project gave her confidence. Through an interpreter she said that the shoot had made her feel beautiful for the first time: ‘This project has risen above my expectations, it’s been fun and a pleasure. As a housewife and mother, I have never had this opportunity. I now feel beautiful and confident about my self-image. Everyone should try something outside of their comfort zone. I’ve been so lucky to experience this with my daughter.’ Her daughter said, ‘My mum and I have never done anything like this together, especially something this creative. I’ve enjoyed seeing the whole project come together and am so happy with my scarf and my mum’s.’

Artist, Lisa Scarlett Ryan said of her involvement that: ‘Hidden Gems enabled my curiosity of textile history to be blended with my textile design and community engagement practice. Time at Gawthorpe Hall exploring the collection, sketching historical designs and researching them, then seeing the inspirational materials go on to inspire, challenge and enthuse ladies who have never designed anything before in their lives has been very fulfilling.’

Did the project fulfil the main aim of bringing a new audience to the GTC? Charlotte Steels, Director of GTC wrote in the exhibition catalogue, ‘The coming together of the two organisations has provided a wonderful opportunity to combine our resources, skills and expertise - inspiring new work and opening creative opportunities to new audiences.’ (Odlin et al 2018) She feels that the project has enabled an intensive programme of high-quality activity to be delivered to women and teenagers from within the local community; supporting them to reinterpret our historic collection of Indian textiles and developing new skills focused on creative and digital design. By creating new learning and participatory opportunities such as this, the team hope to continue engaging audiences locally and regionally with their textile heritage, inspiring future generations of textile artists, makers and designers.

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