

# FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

## Disrupting Ornamentation: Using Walter Crane's historical design methodologies to influence contemporary craft practice

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### Abstract

Using objects from the Manchester School of Art Collection in Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) Special Collections as influence, the artwork display began to explore whether the historical design methodology of Walter Crane (Director of Design at Manchester School of Art between 1893-1898) can inform contemporary craft study today through visually investigating a collection of historical objects and creating a series of contemporary craft compositions.

A practice-based methodology supported an investigation into two objects from the School of Art Collection. It took influence for making from contemporary practice along with historical source material, such as the drawings of nineteenth-century design student Emma Louise Bradbury (Bradbury 1891). The fundamental notion of ornamentation as surface pattern was interrogated through creative experimentation, using design controls taken from Crane's teaching to influence design practice.

The visual display 'Disrupting Ornamentation: De Morgan vase x Pilkington's Vase' (Disrupting Ornamentation) exploited ornamentation from two historical object surfaces. Across three compositions, ornament appeared in multiple materials; with two-dimensional (2D) fabric layers appearing alongside three-dimensional (3D) ornamental forms. The ornamental elements were not fixed, inviting the exhibition's audience to interact with and alter compositions. This contributed to the design methodology research as it could be observed how an audience may respond to the display and to Crane's controls. It also heightened the sense of disruption as the audience disrupted the artistic arrangements.

The overall aim was to build a series of dynamic contemporary craft compositions which demonstrated the way historical ornamentation can be realised as an independent form, removed from the original object surface.

Keywords: ornament; design methodology; disruption; archive object; Walter Crane

### Walter Crane

In 1893, Walter Crane suggested that the Manchester School of Art would benefit from forming an object library that would provide reference and influence for students of design (Shrigley and Davis 1994). This suggestion triggered the formation of the Arts and Crafts Museum at Manchester School of Art. Crane went on to introduce new methods of design teaching including 'ornamental art', which used historical objects as a visual tool for students (Jeremiah 1980). The contents of his lectures can be found within Crane's books 'Line and Form' (1900) and 'Bases of Design' (1925). Crane states that:

*Design in its many forms and applications must be reconciled to certain limitations of material and method...limitations lead to those results of beauty and harmonious expression. (Crane 1925: 121)*

Within 'Bases of Design', one can extract a clear set of design 'controls' from Crane's teaching, and the research project presented through this exhibition report uses these historical controls to inform a methodology for contemporary craft design. Key controls which have influenced this work include:

- Expression of line, for example horizontal lines rest and vertical lines support (Crane 1925: 47);
- Adding to or cutting away from the surface (Crane 1925: 93);
- Pattern designed as surface decoration (Crane 1925: 106);
- Ornamental conditions such as wallpapers and hangings which demand 'patterns which climb upwards' (Crane 1925: 128);
- Beauty of contour, considering the graceful mass in a pattern and using bold and sweeping curves (Crane 1925: 210);
- Enclosures for smaller fields of pattern (Crane 1925: 210);
- 'A form once found is repeated. The eye grows accustomed to it, takes delight in it and expects recurrence' (Crane 1925: 355);
- The unconscious variation of ornament, due to the natural tendency of the hand to vary a form in repeating it (Crane 1925: 357);
- Design built up of a few units (Crane 1925: 372).

### **Object Investigation**

'Disrupting Ornamentation' focused on two objects from the early Arts and Crafts collection of Manchester School of Art; William de Morgan's Bottle-shaped vase (figure 1) (De Morgan 1888) and a vase by Jessie Jones at Pilkington's Lancastrian Tile and Pottery Company (figure 2) (Jones 1907). The creative process began with visual investigations into the objects, drawing the overall object form and then extracting elements of ornament from the surface to form a palette for design.

## Object Investigation: William de Morgan Bottle-shaped Vase



Original pencil drawing from archive object



Object drawing in ink and watercolour



William De Morgan, Bottle-shaped vase, 1888-97  
MMU Special Collections 1896.37



Ornament palette taken from Bottle-Shaped Vase

Figure 1: Conference Poster.

## Object Investigation: Pilkington Vase



Original pencil drawing from archive object



Pilkington Tile and Pottery Co. Ltd, Vase (base), 1907  
MMU Special Collections (1992).249



Pilkington Tile and Pottery Co. Ltd, Vase (base), 1907  
MMU Special Collections (1992).249



Original pencil drawing from archive object

*Figure 2: Conference Poster.*

These ornamental elements were realised in a variety of media and materials. Ornament upon material surface was explored through digital and screen print, exploiting fabric qualities such as translucency and texture through the use of sheer fabrics and flocking techniques. Ornament as independent object was explored through hand-built and water-jet cut ceramics, laser cut wooden and perspex elements and digitally embroidered fabric pieces.



## Original Compositions and Display Method

The elements of ornament were exhibited as a collection of three compositions within wooden trays (figures 3, 4 and 5). Each tray had a two-dimensional (2D) fabric background of printed or stitched pattern, with a series of independent ornamental objects placed upon the surface. The trays referenced elements of Crane's design controls, including ideas of repeated forms; enclosures for smaller fields of pattern; and direction and symmetry within design. However, none were exact repeats. The trays also explored the disruption of ornamentation; through distorted scales, ornament creeping out of boundaries and the layering of ornament over ornament (leading to visual conflicts).



Figure 3: Exhibition display at Futurescan 4: Valuing Practice, University of Bolton, 23<sup>rd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> January 2019.





Figure 4: Close-up of left-hand Tray 1.





Figure 5: Close-up of central and right-hand Trays 2 and 3, and additional ornament collection.

The presentation of the work within wooden trays began as a method for containing and framing the compositions. The trays left the compositions open to interaction, as they were not shown under glass and did not have to be fixed in place. An additional ornament collection was included as a group of objects outside of the tray, to encourage the audience to interact by adding to and taking from existing compositions (figure 5).

Upon final presentation of the work the dark wooden trays, laid out upon a table top, gave the sense of drawers opened within an archive. This made connections with previous archive visits to Wakefield Museum and Gawthorpe Textiles Collection, where archive material and objects are kept within boxes upon shelves. Looking down into the wooden trays echoes the excitement of looking into an un-lidded archive box to discover and interact with its precious contents, albeit with a gloved hand. Caroline Bartlett discusses how her experience within archives informs the site-specific responses she goes on to create.

*I...find that the manner in which I experience the object or collection, (sometimes with privileged access not normally available to the public) becomes the pivot on which to base my interrogations. (Bartlett 2016: 26)*

Although the ornamental compositions that appeared within the drawers delivered a contemporary craft response to a pair of historical objects, their presentation in this way retained a sense of the historic and shares my experience of interacting with archives with the audience, perhaps invoking a similar sense of privilege within them as they are invited to touch, feel and move the objects within the trays.

### Audience Interaction at *Futurescan 4: Valuing Practice*

The *Futurescan 4: Valuing Practice* conference exhibition provided an opportunity to collect visual data regarding audience interaction with the displays. The ornament compositions were documented at six points over the two-day period of display – five of these documentation periods are discussed below. Audience interaction with the work during the exhibition varied between compositions. There was a hesitant approach to moving the ornamental details to begin with, but by the end of day two there had been high levels of interaction between two of the trays.



Figure 6: *Disrupting Ornamentation, Tray 2* 23/01/19 12:37.

During the first day of the exhibition prior to lunch break, it was recorded that only the central tray 2 had been interacted with. Although the ornament within the tray has been moved around, the audience appear to have been hesitant in their interaction as they have not strayed outside the boundaries of the tray in order to bring new ornament in or take ornament out. With this interaction (figure 6), it is interesting to see an echoing of Crane's design controls in which he refers to the 'beauty of contour' and 'bold and sweeping curves' (Crane 1925: 210). The composition has a circular form, with the blue objects placed around the darker blue ring and red spiral. Key points of interest within the arrangement are the attempt to make the pattern more regular by placing the blue objects at regular intervals around the circle; and the identification of relationships between different objects. At the bottom left of the composition a wooden leaf form is matched to the curve of the blue ornament, and the point of this object touches with the darker blue spiral.





Figure 6: *Disrupting Ornamentation, Tray 2 (centre)* 23/01/19 12:37.

On the first day, after the break, all of the trays had now experienced some interaction, with the ornament moving around within and between trays. There is a sense of the compositions becoming busier and the space within the trays becoming fuller.

In Tray 1 (figure 7, left), the interaction is subtle but changes do occur. The audience have identified opportunities for repeat and introduced a new shape to the tray, increasing the number of blue objects to five and rearranging the layout. They are thinking about traditional pattern-making methods, flipping or reflecting the wooden stem object horizontally; and placing similar materials together with the movement of the wooden leaf out of its ceramic enclosure to join the stem in the bottom right corner of the tray. This could also be interpreted as an effort to fill or balance the tray, in opposition to the original composition (figure 4) which was weighted to the left of the tray.



Figure 7: Disrupting Ornamentation, Trays 1 (left), 2 (centre) and 3 (right), 23/01/19 14.45.

In Tray 2 (figure 7, centre), several shapes have been introduced, including some which have been taken from other trays. The scale has increased with the introduction of much larger ornamental elements. The audience have begun to explore material qualities with the overlapping of ornament, including the placing of the hand-built ceramic flower on top of the embroidered object in the bottom left of the tray.

In Tray 3 (figure 7, right), there is a marked contrast from the lack of movement earlier, again with several new elements of ornament introduced to the composition in a range of colours and materials. The composition becomes busy, with the fabric screen print peeking out from below the chaotic spread of ornament. Within this, the audience have begun to think about the physical position of ornament in some instances, for example at the bottom right of the vase print where one wooden object within the series of four has been rotated upright onto its side.

The photograph shown in figure 8 was taken during the opening event of the exhibition. There appears to be a marked increase in confidence from the audience with every element of ornament now appearing inside a tray. On initial viewing the arrangement of ornament appears chaotic, particularly in Tray 3 (figure 8, right), but on closer inspection, thought and design process can be identified within the arrangements.





Figure 8: Disrupting Ornamentation, Trays 1 (left), 2 (centre) and 3 (right), 23/01/19 17.07.

In Tray 2 (figure 8, centre), the ornament has been organised into a series of separate design compositions. These compositions sit separately and there is less interaction between ornament across the whole tray. There is a sense of the forms spanning out from a central point, almost as though they are based around a pivot point and could spin.

Within Tray 3 (figure 8, right) the viewer has made a conscious effort to focus the majority of the composition within the bottom left corner of the tray. Many of the shapes are in contact with each other, forcing new relationships between objects unlike in my original, spaced-out arrangement (figure 5, right). The ornament is also beginning to creep beyond the boundaries of the fabric slightly.

From this point onwards, movement within and between the trays becomes calmer and more considered. Links are beginning to form between each of the trays, with similar shapes placed together in similar ways, such as two blue objects placed together at a central pivot point on the top right of Tray 1 (figure 9, left), and centre of Tray 2 (figure 9, centre). This was the only change within Tray 1, along with the returning of the wooden leaf to its ceramic enclosure.



Figure 9: Disrupting Ornamentation, Trays 1 (left), 2 (centre) and 3 (right), 24/01/19 09.20.

In Tray 2 (figure 9, centre), the sense of a series of design compositions remains, but these have altered from figure 8. The audience focus on bringing similar elements together and limit object collections to specific colour or material; such as multiple pairs of blue ornament, or embroidered poppy motifs placed together with wooden ornament in the top right of the tray (figure 9, centre). The stacking of water-jet cut circles demonstrates the audience moving from the work being arranged largely as flat pieces to a new potential for 3D arrangements or building upwards/outwards.

Tray 3 (figure 9, right) has moved further out of the boundaries of the screen-printed fabric. It is moving towards a more formal arrangement with a considered placement of ornament, for example with wooden and Perspex ornaments appearing to rise out of the top of the vase form.

The image in figure 10 shows the final arrangements of the compositions at the end of the two-day conference. Tray 2 (figure 10, centre) and Tray 3 (figure 10, right) have changed significantly from my original arrangement (figure 5 left and right) and you can see clear relationships between these trays within colour and material use. However, Tray 1 (figure 10, left) has barely changed and has almost returned to my original arrangement (figure 4).





Figure 10: *Disrupting Ornamentation*, Trays 1 (left), 2 (centre) and 3 (right), 24/01/19 16.36.

In Tray 2 (figure 10, centre), all of the elements have come back together into one composition. The blue ornament becomes the focus and base for the arrangement, with other elements acting as embellishments. There is a heightened sense of control along with considered material placement and use of colour. The circles appear to be dismissed at the top left of the tray, showing a sense of refinement from the audience as they select key elements and dismiss others, echoing Crane's idea of 'design built up of a few units.' (Crane 1925: 372)

In Tray 3 (figure 10, right) a similar sense of refinement can be seen, with ornament discarded at the top of the tray, away from the boundaries of the screen-printed fabric. New pieces of ornament such as the dark blue spiral appear within the tray for the first time, illustrating the viewer's confidence in moving ornament between trays. There is a sense of this composition feeling more complete than some of the earlier chaotic arrangements (figure 8), through the grouping of ornament into design compositions or small object collections. This grouping also feels more considered in relation to the screen-printed fabric detail, with ornament placed in relation to the vase-form of the screen print or carefully around the fabric's boundaries.

### General Observations

Crane's controls were reflected at various points throughout the two days of audience interaction, both through arrangements which echo his controls, and others which contradict them. In figure 6 (centre), tray 2, the audience arranged the composition into circular forms, echoing Crane's ideas of 'beauty of contour' and 'bold and sweeping curves' (Crane 1925: 210). There were points of regularity (figure 9 centre, tray 2) where Crane's 'a form once found is repeated' (Crane 1925: 355) was echoed in repeated pairs of blue ornament. However, this idea, along with 'design built up of a few units', (Crane 1925: 372) was also contradicted, with compositions created from several separate ornament

collections and periods of chaos where every element of ornament was placed within the trays (figure 8).

The audience's interaction with "Disrupting Ornamentation" echoes the artistic process in many ways. In figure 6 there was hesitancy from the audience to interact with the work or move ornament between the trays, but this quickly gathered momentum and reached a pinnacle in figure 8, when every element of ornament had been moved into a tray to create overloaded, chaotic compositions. A period of refinement then followed, with a sense of slowing down in order to create calmer, considered and almost-completed compositions. My own artistic process and research could adopt this model- perhaps there is room in my practice and my research to over-ornament, to push the boundaries and create chaos before pulling back and refining my compositions to a final arrangement.

There are various elements of creative exploration that I have witnessed within the audience's interaction with the trays that can bring new perspectives to my research. These include thinking about ways of arranging ornament based on the relationship between shapes; matching lines, curves and points together to form alternative arrangements. The idea of creating a series of design 'moments' echoes my research aims, to show the design potential of historic objects. The audience's methods of displaying collections of ornament in groups as part of one overall composition can inspire my own final display work. I can also consider the 3D quality of the ornament and methods of display which exploit this, such as stacking elements upwards or standing ornament objects on their side or upright.

The display of work raised questions, particularly when I consider the lack of interaction with Tray 1. I have considered possible reasons for this, for example the original composition appearing too 'finished', or the original composition standing alone due to colour and material, in contrast to Trays 2 and 3. I am curious as to whether displaying the work again in an alternative context would have the same level of interaction, or whether interaction would change. Re-displaying the work would provide opportunity to gather tangible feedback from an audience, either written or verbal, to answer further questions around interaction.

## Conclusion

During the process of developing and displaying the work, the significance of the archive experience has become apparent within my research and I have come to realise that interaction with the work is key to my display, not just to my creative development. My original research aims were to bring increased attention and appreciation to archive objects through contemporary craft practice, and I realise now that my appreciation of these objects comes from my privileged experience of accessing and working with historical objects. By presenting work in open trays and inviting interaction, I am able to share this experience with an audience. This display method continues the cycle of interaction, as the audience handle and interact with the elements of ornament that I have developed, from my interactions with and handling of archive and museum objects.

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