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# INNOVATION THROUGH INTERPRETATION: INVESTIGATING INDIGENOUS AND HISTORICAL MATERIAL CULTURE AS A DESIGN TOOL

MATERIAL | CULTURE | ANTHROPOLOGIST | INTERPRETATION | INNOVATION



## ABSTRACT

THE PAPER FOCUSSES ON THE ROLE OF TEXTILE DESIGNER NOT ONLY AS INNOVATOR, BUT AS HISTORICAL RESEARCHER AND ANTHROPOLOGIST. IT HIGHLIGHTS THE MULTIFACETED SKILLS OF TEXTILE PRACTITIONERS IN THEIR INTERPRETATIONS OF HISTORICAL MATERIAL CULTURE AND PRE-INDUSTRIAL APPROACHES TO MATERIAL AND CONSTRUCTION.

Whilst the role of the historian is to study, interpret and record, the Textile Designer must use their findings to innovate and encourage new ways of thinking. They approach historical research as creative thinkers and makers and are able to understand the technicalities behind historical artefacts. Alongside this, they are able to nurture the analytical skills of historical researcher and anthropologist and understand the cultural behaviours, beliefs and attitudes that shaped approaches to making and constructing. The paper looks at how the metaphoric symbolism and construction of historical objects can inform innovative approaches to design, materials and construction in contemporary textile practice. I discuss how my practice is a specific example of these ideas and how I have researched the symbolism and cultural significance of headdresses and war shirts created by North American Blackfoot, Crow and Sioux societies. I consider how I have interpreted these objects and responded to them in innovative ways.

## UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MAKER PROVIDES THE TEXTILE DESIGNER WITH A UNIQUE STANCE ON INTERPRETING HISTORICAL ART AND DESIGN AND THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS IN WHICH IT WAS PRODUCED.

### INTRODUCTION

Textile Designers are innovators and engineers in materials, processes and design thinking. Engaging with cutting-edge technologies and collaborating with interdisciplinary practitioners, they are continuously pushing boundaries and redefining traditional notions of Textile Design. There is much emphasis on innovative technologies and materials, and how changes in society will shape the future role of the Textile Designer. This paper focusses on the role of the Textile Designer not only as innovator, but also as historical researcher and anthropologist. It highlights the multifaceted skills of textile practitioners in their interpretations of historical material culture and pre-industrial approaches to material and construction.

Clementine Deliss, with reference to ethnographic material culture, states:

*...we also need to expand the context of this knowledge by once again taking these extraordinary objects as the starting point and stimulus for contemporary innovation, aesthetic practice, linguistic tradition, and even future product design.*

*(Deliss in Hemmings 2015: 102)*

Many textile practitioners do this, using history to inform decision-making and design thinking within current and future Textile Design. Whilst the role of the historian is to study, interpret and record, the Textile Designer must use their findings to innovate and encourage new ways of thinking.

I discuss how my practice is a specific example of these ideas and how I have interpreted the material culture of North American Blackfoot, Crow and Sioux societies to generate textile innovation.

### TEXTILE DESIGNER AS HISTORICAL RESEARCHER AND ANTHROPOLOGIST

When interpreting indigenous and historical objects, it is necessary to study the culture as a whole and view the textiles as part of a holistic system of values, beliefs and behaviours. It is this approach that many textile practitioners adopt when examining and researching historical material culture. The Royal Anthropological Institute (2015: unknown) defines anthropology as:

*...the study of people throughout the world, their evolutionary history, how they behave, adapt to different environments, communicate and socialize with one another. The study of anthropology is concerned both with the biological features that make us human (such as physiology, genetic makeup, nutritional history and evolution) and with social aspects (such as language, culture, politics, family and religion).*

Therefore when studying aspects of historical material culture, the Textile Designer is nurturing the skills of an anthropologist. They not only ask questions such as why an object was designed and constructed in a particular way and why were the materials used, but think more broadly

about the society as a whole, enquiring why these people think in this way and how their attitudes and behavioural patterns shaped their approach to making. The Textile Designer must not only understand why these things are made socially and culturally, but the psychological reasons behind their construction. The Textile Designer therefore studies human behaviours and modes of thinking, from which they can generate innovative approaches to design, materials and processes.

Textile Designers acquire skills in interpreting the symbolism and metaphoric value of historical artefacts. Boydell and Schoeser (2002: 7) state that the value of an object can be divided into five types such as 'locational, iconographical, archival, aesthetic and transferal'. In interpreting the material culture of Blackfoot, Crow and Sioux societies, I engaged in a process of unpicking individual elements of the objects, asking questions such as why was this material used; why are these elements placed and arranged in this way; why was this colour used?; what informed these decisions in the construction process and; what do the aesthetic results of these decisions mean and communicate? Were these decisions informed by functional or symbolic reasoning? This approach focused on the iconographical value of the object, which is the meaning conveyed through its motifs, imagery, materiality and symbols (Boydell & Schoeser 2002). Alongside this it was necessary to enquire into how to interpret

and understand metaphors within material culture. This is fundamental when researching historical material culture. According to Tilley (1999: 9) metaphors ‘...serve as a binding element in providing an interpretative account of the world’ and can be ‘...conceived as a quality which links together individuals and groups’. This approach intersects with the analytical skills of an historical researcher or anthropologist. Understanding metaphor in the context of textiles can allow the designer to understand the minds of the people and the cultural conditions in which it was produced. Barber states ‘patterned cloth in particular is infinitely variable and, like language, can encode arbitrarily any message whatever’ (1994: unknown).

The creative mind is driven by curiosity. Textile practitioners’ practice-led investigation and material experimentation is driven by questions beginning with ‘what if...?’ and ‘what happens when...?’ It is this dynamic, investigative way of thinking that the designer brings to their interpretation of historical objects

that is arguably different to the more linear and scholarly way of thinking often employed by art historians and archaeologists. It could be said that Textile Designers are unique in their interpretation of material culture as they approach this research from the perspective of makers and creative thinkers, as well as having the analytical tools of historical researcher and anthropologist. Understanding what it means to be a maker and to make provides the Textile Designer with a unique stance on interpreting historical art and design and the social conditions in which it was produced. Gordon (2002: unknown) considered: ‘understanding the complexity of a given task helps researchers think knowledgeably about diverse aspects of production’. Gordon (2002) refers to Lila O’Neale, a weaver who has extensive knowledge of ethno-aesthetics, which is the study of material culture within the specific cultural conditions in which it was produced. She engaged in a study of Yurok-Karok basket weavers and maintained the view that because she

understood the technicalities behind basket making, she understood why they were made as well as how they were made.

## INTERPRETING THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF BLACKFOOT, CROW AND SIOUX SOCIETIES TO GENERATE INNOVATION

Within my practice there is emphasis on researching the material culture of indigenous societies and interpreting this in a way that will inform material innovation. This involves the study of a cultural group and attempting to understand the beliefs and attitudes which shaped their approach to materials, design and construction. The Textile Designer can study the past, using this as a platform on which to create solutions for the present and the future. A case study within my research has been the material culture of the Native American plains Indians, specifically the Blackfoot, Crow and Sioux tribes. These groups are particularly strong examples of how material, construction, and pattern can be used as metaphors for cultural beliefs. Primary research involved



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viewing a small collection of war shirts and a feather headdress crafted by the aforementioned tribes at an outpost of the British Museum to generate the design for Tubing Neck Piece shown in figures 1 and 2 and *Fabric Shred Body Piece* shown in figure 3.

My practice-based research has involved experimentation with manipulating cables, wire and tubing, investigating their capabilities and conceptual meaning. A key object that informed the design of *Fabric Shred Body Piece* was the headdress shown in figure 4. This was constructed of golden eagle tail feathers and decorated with horse hair and ermine tails, having belonged to a chief named Yellow Calf (The British Museum 2015). Having a tangible experience of this object deepened my understanding of the cultural reasoning behind its construction and how it is a metaphor for military prestige and power through material and usage. Penney (1992: 215) states:

*The members of many Native North American tribes thought of eagles as analogues of the thunderbird and considered them among the most powerful of sky creatures. Their feathers could become potently charged objects.*

The sense of power conveyed by the headdress meant that it could only be worn by an important figure within society or the chief of a tribe. The potency and sacred qualities of individual material elements were combined to create a visually imposing object of adornment, communicating the honour and reverence of its wearer. This caused extensive thought into how I could incorporate a similar approach to materiality and construction within my practice. It catalysed consideration of how, as a Textile Designer, I



could select, handle and interlock material elements in a meticulous and considered way, to create pieces which had a striking and evocative impact on a viewer. This informed the construction of the upper half of *Fabric Shred Body Piece*, for which individual strips of fabric were wrapped around a discarded piece of chicken wire to cover the torso (figure 3). To construct the headdress, multiple feathers of the same size and colour had been placed next to each other, creating a sense of pattern and repetition. This informed my approach to repeatedly wrapping individual areas across the entire surface of the chicken wire with fabric strips of the same colour, which created an overall sense of rhythm and pattern, similar to the headdress.

The prominent shape of the headdress evoked a sense of power and informed my approaches to colour and composition when constructing *Fabric Shred Body Piece*. I wrapped the chicken wire with dark brown and black fabric strips which created a distinctive linear quality and a strong visual impact. The headdress has a sense of movement achieved through the form and shape of the feathers, which would sit loosely and naturally on the head of the wearer. The tassels of feathers, ermine tails and hair hang from the war shirt shown in figure 5 in a similarly fluid state. The hide used for the shirts has an organic shape and would drape naturally and loosely across the body, pertaining to beliefs about the animal spirit world. This informed my approach to hanging fabric strips from the upper half of the piece to cover the lower half of the body in *Fabric Shred Body Piece*, evoking a similar sense of looseness and fluidity.

Quillwork was a technique utilised by women within Blackfoot, Crow and Sioux societies to adorn war shirts and other objects with pattern and motifs, shown on the war shirt in figure 5. I researched the technicalities behind its construction along with the behavioural attitudes that shaped this approach to making. Porcupine quills were dyed, softened and then woven, plaited or wrapped onto hide, leather or birch bark. The quillwork applied to war shirts would have taken more than a year to implement (Prindle 1994). Related to this, Brasser (2009: 150) suggests:

*The origin of quillwork was associated with certain female spirits such as Whirlwind Woman among the Arapaho, and Double Women among the Sioux. Because of these spiritual origins and the involvement of ritual procedures, quillwork acquired a somewhat sacred status.*

This reveals that the process of its creation was a ritualistic practice, allowing it to acquire sacred importance. It was reflective of artistic skill and revered in the same way that men valued their military achievements (Berlo and Phillips 1998). The repetitive and ritualistic technique of quillwork and wrapping strands of hair with porcupine quills informed a meticulous and considered approach to construction. One example was wrapping iridescent tubing with shiny wire at regular intervals and twisting lengths of this tubing together to create a prominent and distinctive neck piece. This was executed in a meticulous and consistent manner, with the intention of creating a piece with an imposing aesthetic when worn as shown in figures 1-3.

The materials used to construct these objects was a key element that informed my thinking. Shirts were constructed of materials derived from natural surroundings including hide, human and horse hair, ermine tails, porcupine quills and natural pigments, all of which held inherent spiritual meaning. According to Berlo and Phillips (1998: 113), '...powerful items of ceremonial gear were described in words whose approximate translation is 'something sacred wears me', a reversal of ordinary assumptions about who is the wearer and what is worn'. Materiality connected people to their natural surroundings and allowed them to express and preserve their sacred relationship with the animal spirit world. Native North American tribes used found materials in their surrounding environments, using them as fabric to construct their culture and identity. This shaped my decision to utilise found materials such as discarded telephone cables, electrical components and chicken wire to create adornment pieces, highlighting the possibility of sourcing materials from mundane environments and using them to design and construct in an innovative way. This related to broader concerns within Textile Design, such as sustainability, re-use and re-cycling. The materials used in these historical societies helped to maintain society's ideals and beliefs for future generations. The Textile Designer can adopt a similar role within a contemporary context by considering how our choice of materials and design thinking can impact on and inform society with regard to paramount issues such as sustainability and technology. Recording, observing and understanding the significance of historical material culture can allow us to interpret it within our practice to encourage innovation.

## INDIGENOUS AND HISTORICAL MATERIAL CULTURE CAN BE INTERPRETED AND INVESTIGATED BY TEXTILE PRACTITIONERS TO GENERATE INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO DESIGN, MATERIALS AND CONSTRUCTION.

### CONCLUSION

It is evident that historical objects and pre-industrial approaches to making and constructing can hold value in the process of developing textile innovation. Indigenous and historical material culture can be interpreted and investigated by textile practitioners to generate innovative approaches to design, materials and construction. This allows them to nurture the skills of a historical researcher and anthropologist through the study of cultural groups and behaviours.

With rapidly developing technologies and material advancements, how can we incorporate historical objects into future design thinking? Areas for future research include considering the role of the Textile Designer within museums and heritage. With the skills of a historical researcher and anthropologist, what can the Textile Designer offer through their interpretations of museum collections and the display of historical objects? How can their interpretations inform, educate and encourage innovation? How do these skills nurture the role of the Textile Designer as curator and museum educator?

These considerations further highlight the interdisciplinary and versatile nature of Textile Design thinkers and their contribution to a variety of cultural sectors, which will continue to diversify in the future.

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### FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: *Tubing Neck Piece*. Wire, cable, tubing, metal fastenings, Lydia Bartlett, 2014.

Figure 2: *Tubing Neck Piece*. Wire, cable, tubing, metal fastenings, Lydia Bartlett, 2014.

Figure 3: *Fabric Shred Body Piece*. Discarded chicken wire, painted fabric shreds, tubing, cable, wire, Lydia Bartlett, 2014.

Figure 4: *Plains people/Arapaho Feather Bonnet of Yellow Calf*. Skin, horse hair, fur, eagle feathers, © The Trustees of the British Museum, 2015.

Figure 5: *Crow/Blackfoot shirt*. Wool, skin, human hair, ermine tails, © The Trustees of the British Museum, 2015.