

FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

Wool & Ull, how the history of British and Icelandic knitting traditions and industry have influenced my practice and teaching

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Abstract

As an educator and design practitioner within Knitted Textiles and Knitwear Design, the cycle of learning and teaching is continual. I am keen to discover new methods and materials for both teaching and designing as these inform and inspire my work. Within textile design education it is believed that in order to educate one needs a solid understanding of the historical and contemporary context of their specialism. This is realised through an understanding of traditional practice and an appreciation of technological advances. As production and expertise moves increasingly towards digital manufacturing, the characteristics and qualities found in traditional fabrics are still widely replicated in industry. This paper presents a series of small-scale practice-based research projects, undertaken with industry partners. Samples from each of the projects were presented in the Futurescan 4: Valuing Practice exhibition (Alexander 2019). Each project will be used as a case study to evidence how learning from history, tradition and industry can inform contemporary knit design and education. In particular, undertaking these research projects has enabled me to engage with industry partners and learn from their expertise. Reflecting upon these projects highlights how integrating traditional knit stitches and heritage yarns into newly created textiles allows an exploration and experience akin to that of a student. In turn, these experiences influence and inform the delivery and content of the courses that I teach on. Through describing this series of practice-based projects I intend to illustrate how I have learned from history, tradition and industry and articulate why and how I incorporate this into my teaching practice.

Keywords: wool, knitwear, Fairisle, Sanquhar, hand-crafted

Introduction

As Knit Technician and Knitwear Tutor within the Fashion and Textiles department at the Glasgow School of Art (GSA) in the United Kingdom (UK) and as Visiting Lecturer at Reykjavik School of Visual Arts in Iceland, where I teach on their Textiles Diploma Course. I have continued to develop my teaching skills whilst maintaining my own practice and find that one cannot exist successfully without the other. The challenges and developments that I encounter as a designer feed directly into the teaching I deliver to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. As I am at the start of my research career, through this short paper, I will focus on projects that bring together experiences and findings from undertaking knit-based projects and working in both countries. Through the case studies outlined, I intend to provide an overview that demonstrates how history, tradition and industry have influenced and inspired my teaching.

Practice Background and Interests

My interest in traditional techniques originated from an experience during my final year as a BA (Hons) Textile Design student at GSA when I visited Moscow in the midst of winter. Having never experienced such cold weather I truly appreciated the hand knitted shawls, socks and mittens purchased during my visit. The pieces I bought to keep me warm became a source of inspiration in my practice and instigated an addiction to shawls and scarfs. After completing my undergraduate studies, I began a master's programme at GSA, the MDes in Textiles as Fashion. The final collection that I produced was inspired by my favourite cable knit cardigan that was knitted for my father by his mother, my grandmother (figure 1). She was an extremely talented hand and machine knitter and it took me until

adulthood to actually appreciate all that she made for me. Through the MDes collection, I wanted to make cables wearable again and worked with proportion and placement to create more contemporary designs. Upon graduating from the master's programme I maintained my own practice alongside my employment as Knit Technician at GSA. Learning new techniques and traditions related to knitting is a passion that I can indulge with both job roles (figure 2). Since this time, I have been involved in many freelance projects for film and television. The majority of commissions have been to remake archive pieces that had been hand knitted and had no existing pattern. Some items were to be replicated and made on machine as a matter of urgency and I enjoy the varied challenges that arise with such projects.



Figure 1: MDes collection, Christie Alexander, December 2005.

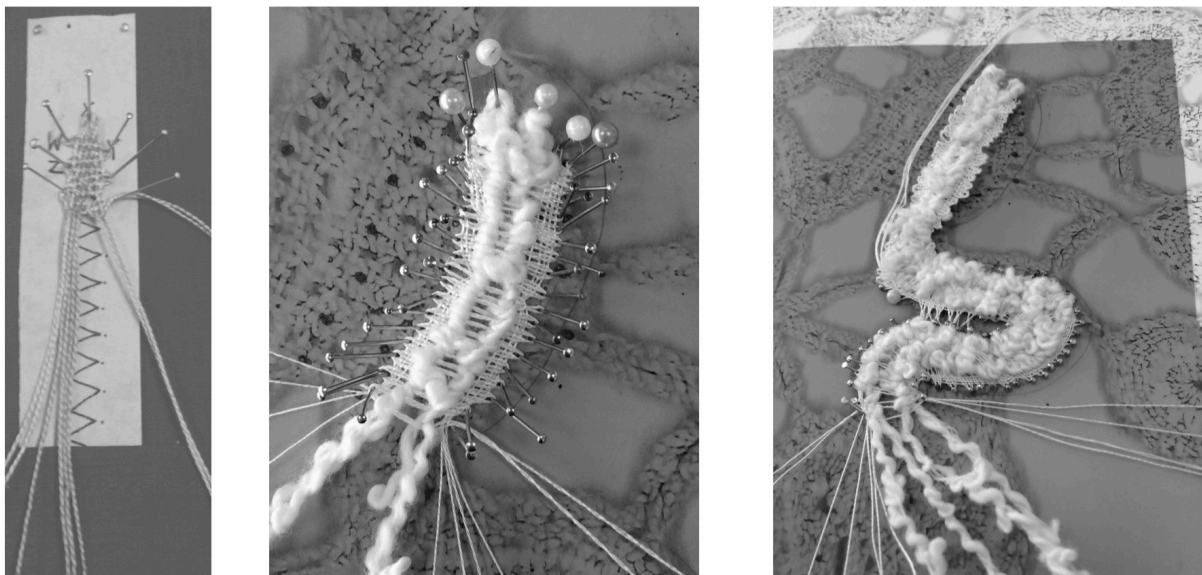


Figure 2: Bobbin lace design, Christie Alexander, February 2015.

Scottish Traditional Knitting

My interest in knitting traditions led me to explore the knitting industry in Shetland where I met with the worlds' fastest Fairisle hand knitter; Hazel Tindall. Tindall instigated teaching this Fairisle, multi-coloured pattern knitting technique, at Primary and Secondary schools, as it was no longer part of the

curriculum. I also met with her colleagues who volunteered and travelled to the most remote locations to spread their passion for Fairisle hand knitting. It proved to be extremely popular with children and tourists alike. This specific style of hand knitting is a craft that is the centre of Shetland Wool week. This event attracts tourists from all over the world, in particular Japan and the United States of America (USA). Whilst in Shetland I met with numerous other people involved in the industry. The spinners, weavers and knitwear manufacturers, Jamiesons', gave me a tour of their factory and explained the process from sheep to sweater. Jamieson and Smiths, are also spinners based in Shetland, who specialise in hand knitting yarns. They were equally as welcoming and offered the same hospitality. Both companies were keen to be involved in projects with the students at GSA.

This idea of raising awareness of endangered crafts and elevating their profile, is something I feel very strongly about. Sanquha' knitting is lesser known than Fairisle, it can be recognised by its distinct black and white motif patterning. It can be defined in more specific terms as there is clear documentation on the origins, use and meaning of this patterning. It is in the midst of a revival, thanks to a lottery funded project. I visited the village of Sanquhar in summer 2018 and spent time with the manager of the project who coordinates the venture. At the Sanquhar based 'A the Airts' Knitting studio, there are hand and machine knitting classes. They are designed to engage with the local community and teach them the traditional techniques and patterns. Beside the knitting studio is a shop and café that sell Sanquha' style, knitted products. Since the visit, I have been liaising with one of the few Sanquhar knitting specialists who has agreed to participate in the next Woolmark Conference. This will take place at GSA later this year and is a great platform for sharing expertise with students, graduates and practitioners.

Icelandic Traditional Knitting

Advising on innovating from tradition is of great interest to me. My first teaching trip to Iceland allowed me to connect with designers and knitwear manufacturers. I developed a collaborative project between the Reykjavik School of Visual Arts and Varma, the only remaining Icelandic manufacturer who do not outsource production overseas. The project winner was awarded time with the company to recreate their knitted designs on a bigger scale with the use of Shima machinery within Varma. Shima and Stoll are the two most advanced manufacturers of digitally programmable and operational knitting machines. Therefore, it is a great benefit to knit and knitwear designers to have a comprehension of the programming and manufacturing capabilities. The course at Reykjavik School of Visual Arts, encourages students to be as experimental as possible, using various types of yarns, fabrics and a combination of hand tooled techniques to create unique and striking designs. In contrast, the group had to design suitable fabrics that could be made by Varma on a larger scale. This led to analysing and exploring the potential and benefits of both hand-crafted and digitally manufactured fabrics (figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: Examples from of project with Reykjavik School of Visual Arts and Varma, May 2014.

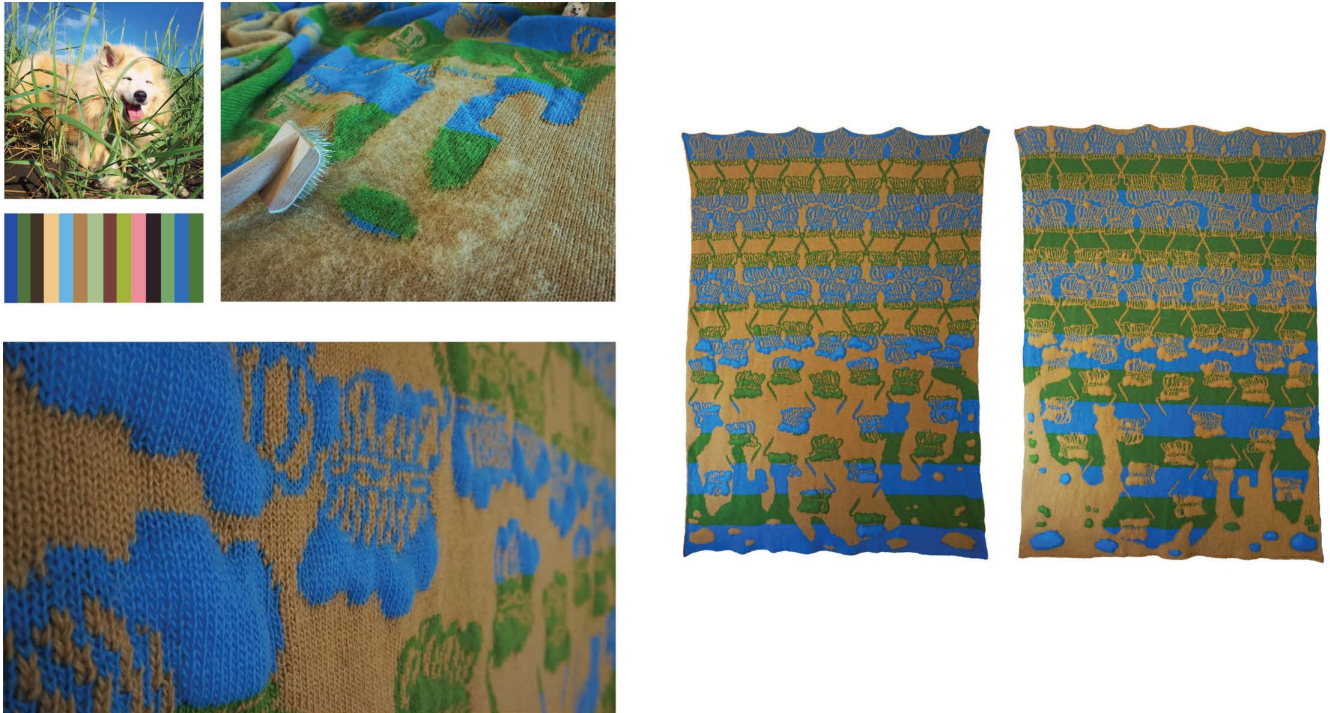


Figure 4: Examples from of project with Reykjavik School of Visual Arts and Varma, May 2014.

Project 1: Grey Sheep Project

The contacts I made in Reykjavik led me to become involved in the Grey Sheep Project (Eliasson 2014). This was created by Olafur Eliasson and Börkur Arnason, director of i8 Gallery, Reykjavik. The duo discovered that grey sheep had been out of favour due to the difficulty locating them in the grey toned landscape of Iceland and because the colour of their wool was not as popular as other natural tones of black and white. They decided to employ a shepherd to oversee the breeding of grey sheep and encourage traditional farming methods to be used. They did not want the sheep left in barns during the harshest winter months, they wanted them to be exposed to the rain, snow and wind in order to encourage their fleece to become softer and suppler, not matted from being reared indoors with little room to roam around. The sheep had traditional stone wall shelters that they could use during the worst of the winter weather. Eventually, the fleece from the flock was spun into yarn by Istex, Iceland's biggest spinner. Hand spinning was too slow for the amount of wool that was gathered.

As part of this project, I was commissioned by Arnason to develop knitted samples that resembled the structure of an egg carton. I designed and made 13 knitted samples, exploring various hand-tooled techniques on the Brother KH260, knitting machine, for Eliasson to choose from (figure 5). The team wanted to create something unique, thought provoking and special enough to honour the meaning of the project. Consequently, Eliasson created the Multidimensional Prayer Mat. Each Mat was constructed on a domestic knitting machine using a hand tooled technique. As the Mat was double sided, the two pieces had to be hand stitched together. Firstly, on the inside, along every repeat and then the Mat was finished with a crochet chain stitch around the perimeter (figure 6). The time involved in making the Mats added to the value and appreciation of the grey wool. This artwork featured in Art Review in 2014/15 and the 12 editions were displayed and sold internationally until 2018 when the last edition was made. This was the first time I fully engaged with the ethical and moral responsibilities we have as designers and the ability we have to determine changes in attitudes of the consumer.

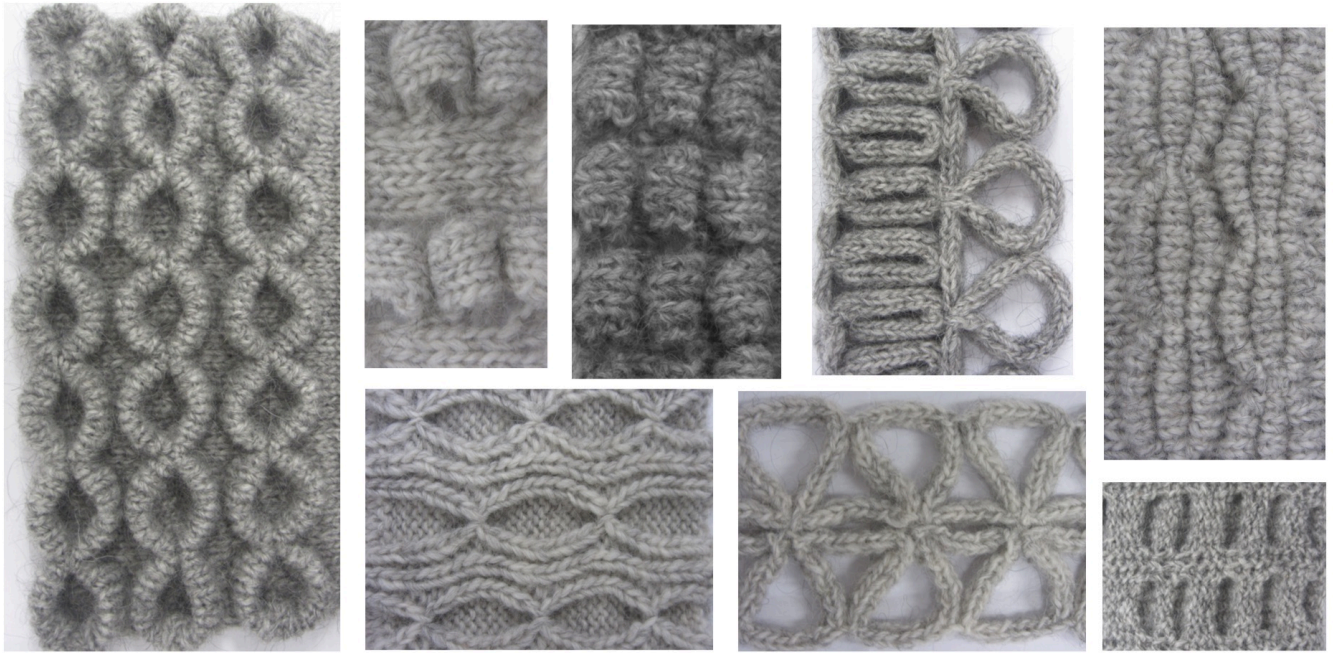


Figure 5: Grey Sheep Project, knitted samples, Christie Alexander, November 2013.

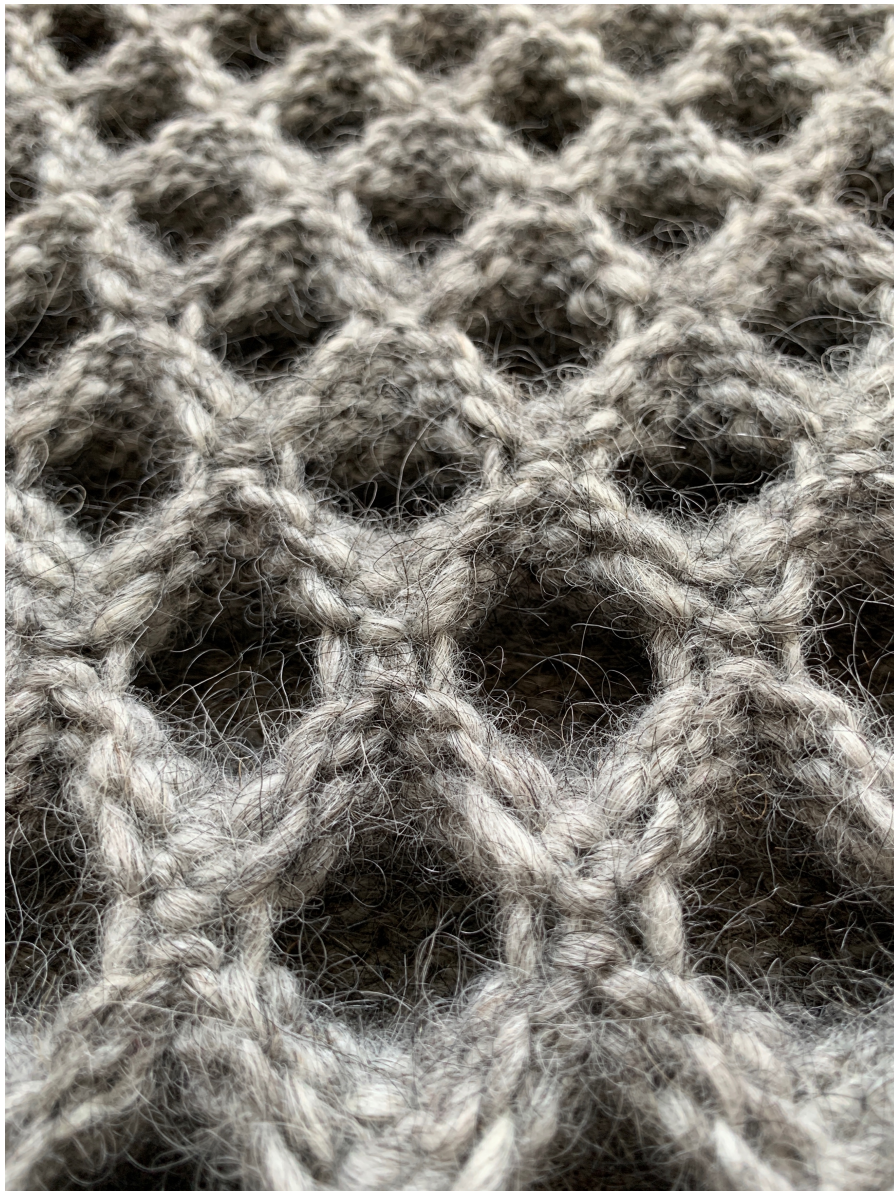


Figure 6: Grey Sheep Project, final knitted structure, Christie Alexander, January 2014.

Project 2: Re-mantle and Make

Due to this newfound interest in responsible design, I took part in the Re-Mantle and Make project written and overseen by a team of researchers at GSA (Baille 2017, McHattie and Baille 2018). They worked with the surplus materials donated by luxury Scottish textiles manufacturers. This included leather, lace, cashmere selvages and woollen yarn. The brief was to make a design for a collar, utilising offcuts of materials with the technology and facilities available at the local MAKLAB. This design could theoretically be bought by individuals so that they could make it themselves within the MAKLAB alongside other sustainable designers. I was invited to create a number of possible designs before submitting the pattern for two final products. I explored a combination of crochet and machine knitted stitches, with woollen yarn and cashmere selvages. The most successful integration was with cashmere cut into narrow strands that I then integrated into the structure, using an e-wrap technique, to create a decorative, soft surface on a strong woollen base. I selected one final design which was made with laser cut leather pieces that were crocheted together with woollen yarn (figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7: Re-mantle and Make textile samples, Christie Alexander, January 2017.



Figure 8: Re-mantle and Make textile samples, Christie Alexander, January 2017.

Project 3: Palestinian Embroidery Project

The appreciation of craft and passing on particular craft techniques to others formed part of another project that was included within the accompanying exhibition for Futurescan 4: Valuing Practice (Alexander 2019). The Palestinian Embroidery Project (Anderson 2016) was written and overseen by Clare Anderson, Head of Textiles at Hereford College of Arts. The project was open to all interested women over a period of 10 weeks and comprised a series of workshops. Each workshop lasted 2 hours and took place within the Glasgow Women's Library. At each gathering, there was a demonstration of traditional Palestinian embroidery stitches and a talk from a guest speaker in relation to the weekly topic. As part of my involvement, I was asked by Anderson to modify and machine knit a pattern from the Glasgow Women's Library archive for workshop participants to embroider. The structure was constructed using a tuck-stitch machine knitting technique, that looks like a honeycomb structure, that mimicked the warp and the weft of the cloth which the women used when learning to stitch.

In addition to creating panels of honeycomb structured, machine knitted panels, for participants, I delivered a lecture during the ninth workshop, titled: Rose and Trellis -_Scottish knitting traditions. I discussed Fairisle and Sanquhar techniques, including the traditional and contemporary use of both. I explained my own practice, with a focus on the significance of the 'motif' within Scottish knitting traditions. Significantly, the snowflake motif, common in Fairisle and Sanquhar knitting, is similar to the Palestinian Star of Bethlehem motif, that workshop participants had been practising. There was an exhibition to celebrate the outcomes from the Palestinian Embroidery workshops that took place in the Spring 2016. Alongside the new works, we presented documentation of traditional Palestinian embroidery from partners in the West Bank. The discussions and experience I had with project participants inspired me to create my own design work that challenged the traditional use of symmetry, scale, colour and placement of pattern, that is evident in traditional Palestinian Embroidery resources. This was encouraged by Anderson and was included in the exhibition (figures 9 and 10).

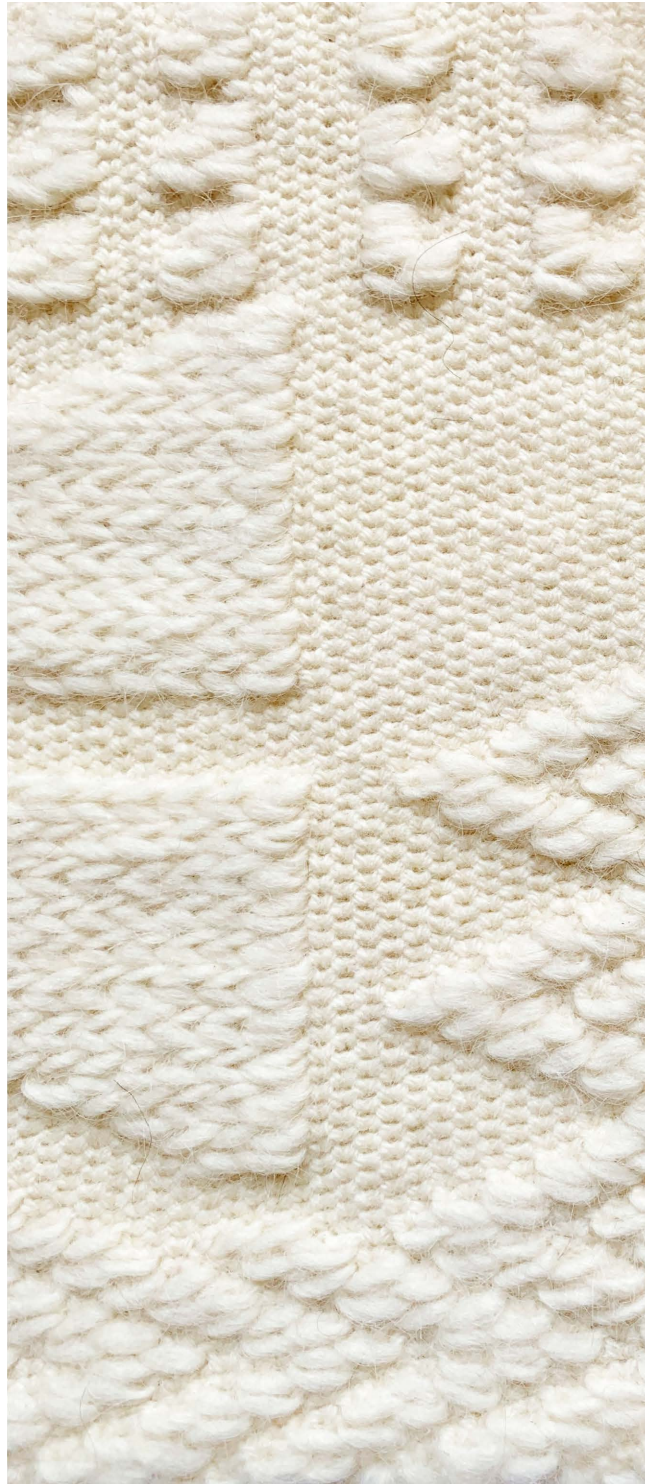
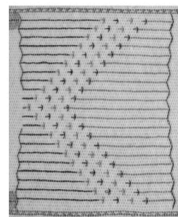
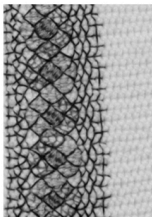
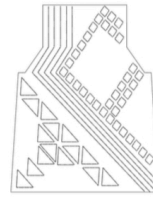
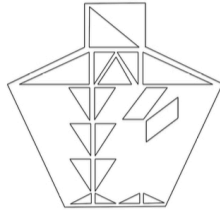


Figure 9: Palestinian Embroidery Project evidence, March 2016.

التطريز الفلسطيني
Embroidery:
تمكين المرأة
Empowering Women

وتعزيز and
Strengthening
المجتمع
Communities



<http://www.womenandtextiles.org>

Figure 10: Palestinian Embroidery Project evidence, March 2016.

Conclusions

It is the types of projects outlined through this short paper that influence my teaching, as they allow the exploration of ideas within the context of designing for commercial gain whilst celebrating traditional techniques and acknowledging the skills required to work within industry. Looking forward, I am keen to develop a collaborative project with the new Scottish based Stoll studio operated by GSA graduate, Hillary Keyes. At GSA, within the fashion programme, the knitwear curriculum is in its infancy, I envisage developing the programme to include access to Stoll technology. I feel encouraged to discover that the basis for designing for Stoll is a thorough understanding of traditional knitted stitch structures and an appreciation for qualities of yarn and how to exploit their beauty by using them within the correct context. In order to innovate, one must appreciate the history and traditions of the many crafts that are linked to knitting and knitwear design. Therefore, teaching how to knit traditional techniques on domestic machines can provide an in-depth understanding of what can be programmed on digital knitting machines. Ultimately training students for a wide variety of graduate employment opportunities.

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