The Beginning Design Student: Pedagogy and Pattern

Author Sara Desvernine Reed, Ph.D.
Virginia Commonwealth University

With a broad spectrum of cultural and artistic periods, designers and works worthy of discussion, one challenge for the beginning design student is developing an understanding of the history of the field and the value of historic analysis and research in building design skills. Rather than offering an encyclopedic collection of works in a design history course, it can be advantageous to consider particular works/buildings/objects as a methodological opportunity to build the student's analytical and research skills. With this practice in mind, I have been investigating the utility of object based research as a pedagogical tool. This paper will focus on one assignment, "The Pattern Project," for beginning interior design students as a means of developing research and analytical skills.

The focus of the "Pattern Project" for the beginning design student is to use textiles as a point of departure to explore the intersection of narrative, technology and materiality. In choosing a historical pattern for research and evaluation, students begin exploring the pattern formally, thereby honing their observation skills. They examine the pattern in relation to six areas of inquiry: materiality, design, color, culture and history, craft, and use. This exploration leads to questions about how patterns communicate and transmit meaning, and further, how textile research can be utilized to provoke an understanding of the cultural, political and economic circumstances of a particular time and place. Such an investigation naturally poses questions about production and consumption that underscore shifting economic, political, regional and global relationships.

The assignment culminates with an oral presentation of their findings and an 18" x 24" presentation board in landscape orientation that communicates their research and design analyses. This exercise allows beginning design students to further develop their graphic and oral communication skills, considering the relationship between object and text in a meaningful way. Students consider legibility and self-editing as significant elements in sharing ideas. A key part of this process is developing students' understanding of relevant sources, citing when appropriate both text and images.

As previously stated, the challenge for a history survey course in any discipline is the growing array of coverage that is an impossible feat for any instructor. As scholars have been debating the value of the introductory history course's "coverage model" since the 1960s (Sipress and Voelker 2011), new approaches suggest aligning the objectives of assignments with the overarching goals of the course. In the case of the "Pattern Project," the goals are twofold: 1. to develop a methodology for the evaluation of an object or space and 2. to gain a greater appreciation for the complexity of objects that often serve as surface decoration. Although the focus of the project is to use textile patterns as a point of departure to explore the intersection of narrative, technology and materiality, a broader goal is to instill a culture of curiosity in the classroom and to embolden students in their critical thinking. There have been numerous studies especially geared to K-12 education that explore this phenomenon. One educator has written, 'For students to be curious, they must feel worthy of seeking. They must feel entitled to ask questions and encouraged to stray, to explore, to seek' (Shonstrom 2014). Many design

students may feel comfortable taking risks in their creative pursuits, but typically they are more insecure in their writing and research skills. This project is intended to provide students with tools to strengthen their written and oral communication skills while also making research less daunting and to see it as a vital part of the design process.

After the first iteration of this project, I adjusted the project to reflect these goals of fostering deeper understanding and curiosity for my students. In order for my students to develop lasting connections on their own, I needed a better understanding of their design curriculum and how history and theory fits within their educational trajectory. According to numerous education experts, considering the entire life cycle of an object increases the learning effect (Johnson 2011). Therefore, partnering with studio faculty allows students to explore the project from multiple perspectives. My colleague, Emily Smith, who shares an interest in pattern and materials research, and I conceived of the project from the vantage point of both my course (History and Theory of Interior Environments) and her Fundamentals of Design class, both for first year interior design students.

In addition, I developed a modeling exercise to underscore the multifaceted nature of object based research and introduce the project. I begin with a brief workshop on toile, as a form of modeling how a single object can spark a flow of interrogation. Specifically, I use a textile sample called 'American Independence Toile' or 'The Apotheosis of Franklin,' 1780-1790 (Figure 1). According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, the generic definition of toile is any of many plain or simple twill weave fabrics, especially linen. And, more specifically it often refers to a cotton or linen fabric characterized by monochromatic prints on a light background. Toile also commonly implies, 'Toile de Jouy,' or fabric from Jouy-en-Josas, a French town that was home to the most famous producer of these textiles, the Oberkampf manufactory. These intricate images included pastoral scenes and landscapes, but depictions of political and military subjects, such as this one (Figure 1), were also common. (Riffel and Rouart 2003).

Figure 1: 'The Apotheosis of Franklin' 1780-1890, England, plate printed linen and cotton. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Toile may be something that students either know nothing about or they may have associations of 'old, traditional, found in Grandma's house or a second-hand store.' Yet, through formal and contextual analysis, a global story emerges that spans from India, western Europe to the American colonies, a story about shifting technologies and geopolitics, and even identity politics. According to textile scholar, Whitney A. J. Robertson, 'Every inch of the pattern repeat [of the American Independence Toile] is both visually appealing and loaded with meaning, creating a design that almost begs the viewer to play 'I Spy.' Perhaps this is why the 'Apotheosis' became so well-known in its own time and so highly collected afterwards' (Robertson, 2012, 6). By delving into the history of toile and more specifically this pattern, students explore how observation can lead to questions and thereby begin the research process. In essence, they follow this practice: Observation of Material/Object; Establish Research Questions; Investigation; Analysis, Reflection; More questions; Repeat.

To begin the exercise, students are placed in groups of five or six around a sample of the toile and they are asked to look at it formally, thereby honing their observation skills. They begin evaluating the textile based on the project's six areas of inquiry: materiality, design, color, culture and history, craft and use. Through this process, they establish what they are able to glean from observation and what types of questions lead to further investigation. For instance, in looking at the design of the sample, they ask questions such as, who are the figures represented? What is happening in this narrative? Does this sample include the entire repeat and how large is that repeat? What does the scale suggest about its use and where it would be in an interior environment? In terms of materiality and color, they ask about what it is made of and whether it is woven or printed, and further, why there are only two colors. This analysis naturally provokes questions about the context in which the textile was made, distributed and used.

Once students are made aware of the complexity of images in this single design, it opens up inquiry into why it was made, for whom, how it was made and how the dissemination of iconography manifested during this period. For instance, the sample utilizes images taken from other sources, but it takes the subject further; rather than commemorating a specific historical event, the toile's designer combined images of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin with a wealth of well-known symbols of liberty and the American nation to create an allegorical piece that celebrated both the creation of America and its greatest heroes. (Robertson, 2012). The figure of George Washington, first President of the United States of America, is taken from a painting by the American artist John Trumbull (1756-1843) that had been engraved by Valentine Green in 1781. One scene shows Washington driving a chariot with an allegorical figure of America holding a plaque inscribed 'American Independence 1776'. The other main scene shows the goddess Athene with the statesman Benjamin Franklin and a figure of Liberty bearing a scroll inscribed 'where liberty dwells there is my country' (V&A Museum, n.d.).

These symbols were important testaments to the foundation of the new American nation and would have been readily recognized by a literate class of Americans. For instance, the design is known to have been used in the house of the President of Congress, Richard Henry Lee, in New York in 1785, described by a guest: 'My chamber is ... prettily furnished. Which way soever I turn my eyes I find a

triumphal Car, a liberty Cap, a Temple of Fame or the Hero of Heroes [Washington], all these and many more objects of a piece with them, being finely represented on the hangings.' (V&A Museum, n.d.)

Often students immediately note that the label on the original source provides information that it was made in England from 1780-1790. An understanding of broader historical context opens up questions about how and why an American story with American heroes, made shortly after the Revolutionary War, was made in England. The story of printed textiles begins much earlier with the European taste for Indian calicos in the eighteenth century, eventually leading to European manufacturers establishing competitive domestic markets for cotton printed fabrics and ultimately an understanding of colonial taxes. The American colonies were not allowed to manufacture their own printed cottons, having to send their raw materials back to England and the importing the finished product.

Comparative analysis of the Apotheosis toile with other printed textiles of the period highlights the value of new manufacturing technologies this product. The introduction of copper-plate printing in the 1750s presented new possibilities in the development of printed textile design, allowing a fineness of detail and delicacy of drawing which had not been achieved in earlier wood-block printed textiles. It also allowed much larger pattern repeats, which made it particularly suitable for bed hangings. This line of inquiry opens up an excellent opportunity to discuss the valuable resources from museums such as the Metropolitan, Winterthur Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum that showcase decorative arts and period rooms that amplify the story of how this textile may have been originally used. And of course, it elicits a conversation about how unusual it would be to have a sofa or bed covered in twenty-first century political figures.

The value of developing contextual understanding is crucial to a full appreciation of this particular narrative pattern. Considering how this textile has shifted in meaning over time, we also discuss a few examples of contemporary toiles, including "Harlem Toile" by Sheila Bridges from 2006. Sheila Bridges created her own toile based on her neighborhood in Harlem, infusing this traditional scenic fabric with images of African American everyday life. Often traditional toiles included prominent classical monuments referencing the European Grand Tour as a sign of education and refinement in the late eighteenth century. Here she places African Americans within these scenes—adding them to a story from which they were often excluded (Cooper Hewitt Museum, n.d.)

As students develop questions for further research, they are also given support from our Arts Librarian who helps them to understand how to identify relevant sources and review when and how to cite both text and images. Carla Mae also created a library webpage dedicated to our project, with advice about books, articles, and databases that may be helpful for research. Although my students are incredibly reliant on digital research, they quickly learn the value of individuals like our arts librarian, Carla-Mae Crookendale, in helping to expand their research abilities.

The story of toile offers an opportunity to expound upon the value of object centered investigation. Beginning with something seemingly ordinary and showing its extraordinary capacity to tell us a larger story about a particular time and place, the exercise sets the students on their own path to discover the intersection of narrative, technology and materiality investigating their pattern.

The assignment culminates with an oral presentation of their findings and an 18" x 24" presentation board that communicates their research and design analyses. This exercise allows students to further

develop their graphic and oral communication skills, considering the relationship between object and text in a meaningful way. Students consider legibility and self-editing as significant elements in sharing ideas. Students take a graphics course concurrently where they are introduced to the basics of InDesign. In the future, the project could be further enhanced by becoming an integral element of the Graphics course. In the remaining portion of the paper, I would like to share examples of student work to highlight the variety and complexity of their research and presentations.

In this first example (Figure 2), student Abby Knuff chose the Greek key pattern, which she had noticed kept reappearing since antiquity and one that we had first encountered in an amphora at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. She looked at a textile made by a contemporary manufacturer, Shumacher. Her poster includes a textual evaluation of the major themes: materiality, design, color, culture and history, craft and use, as well as sketches that show her investigation of color contrast of the three different color ways available from the manufacturer. Two sketches show her exploration into the origins of the pattern, including one in which she explores the idea of infinity as expressed through the Meander River in Asia Minor, said to have been the source of inspiration for the motif. In the other sketch, she evaluated the concept of stability as expressed in interlocking elements in the second sketch.

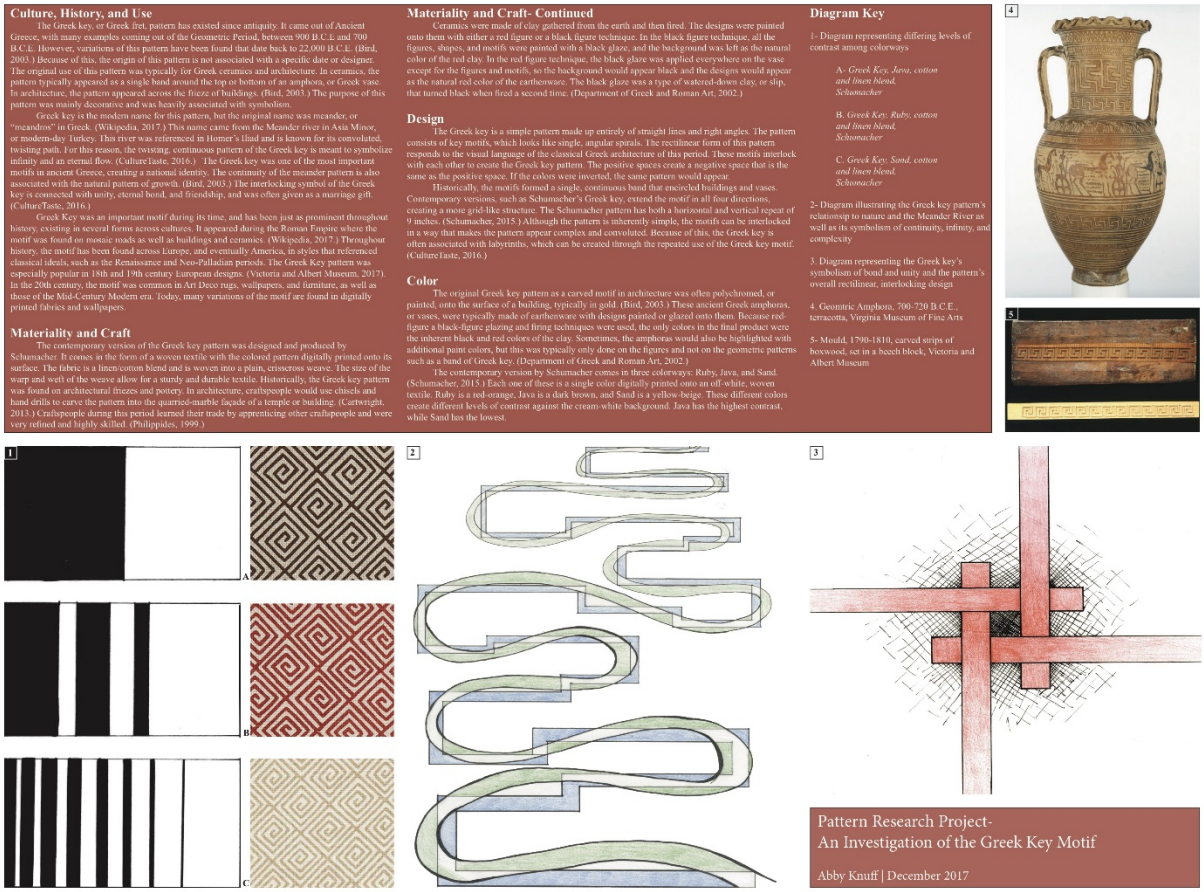

Figure 2: Abby Knuff, 'Pattern Project Research: An Investigation of the Greek Key Motif' Fall 2017. Poster 18" x 24". (Image courtesy of Abby Knuff).

The sample that Mathew Toscano chose to evaluate, called 'Chevron Black,' 2011, came from Spoonflower, a low cost, digitally printed fabric (Figure 3). Spoonflower is an on demand digital printing service since 2008 out of North Carolina, and is currently the largest collection of independent fabric designers in the world. In choosing this pattern, Mathew was inspired by popular culture, specifically his favorite show, 'Twin Peaks,' to begin thinking about how pattern can amplify larger themes within the structure of a story. For instance, he noted that the repetition of the motif in the television series may represent the persistent dichotomy between good and evil as portrayed in the series. Mathew also included a timeline that examined how the simple zigzag pattern has been used since antiquity and by various cultures in diverse media, often taking on very different meanings and sometimes leading to questions of cultural appropriation.

Figure 3: Matthew Toscano, 'ZIGZAG: An Investigation' Fall 2017, poster 18" x 24" (Image courtesy of Matthew Toscano).

Two students looked at popular herringbone patterns, one inspired by a scarf that she owned and the other by walking paths around campus. Both students wanted to explore how herringbone patterns vary depending on materiality. In particular, each examined the use of the pattern in masonry as well as in textiles for both fashion and interiors. Seylar Pring discussed how this pattern was used in antiquity as a method for shock absorption in streets and structures (Figure 4). And then she further explored how this structural system transferred to wool offering flexibility and movement. Jada Hitt's sample herringbone was her silk scarf, and she focused on this pattern's dynamic qualities, creating a sense of

movement when interacting with light (Figure 5). Her sketches reflect how alternating colors moving directionally add to this dynamic quality.

Figure 4: Seylar Pring, 'Herringbone' Fall 2017, Poster 18" x 24" (Image Courtesy of Seylar Pring).

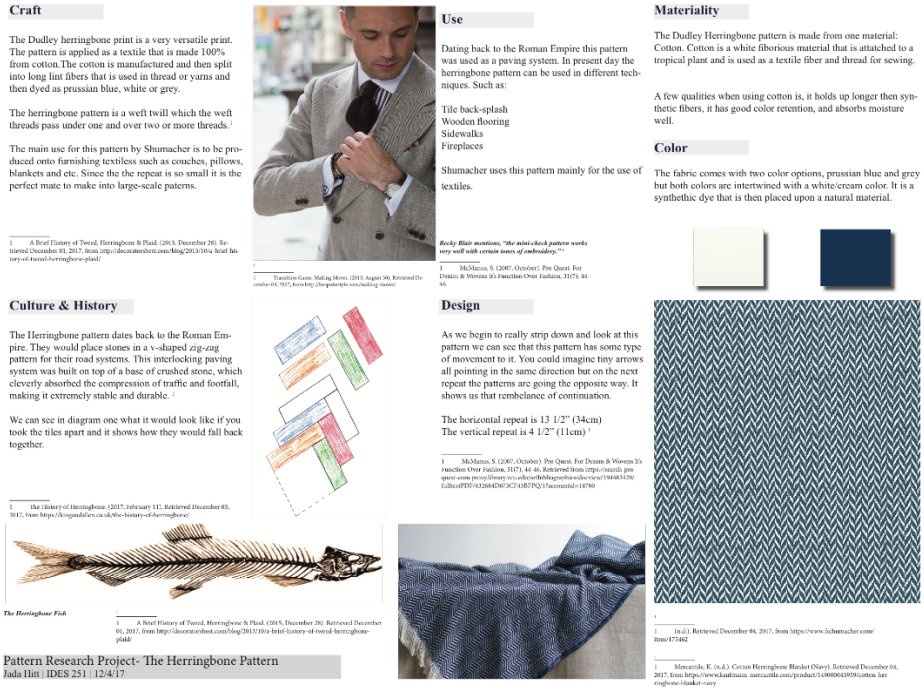

Figure 5: Jada Hitt, 'Pattern Research Project: The Herringbone Pattern,' Fall 2017, Poster 18" x 24" (Image courtesy of Jada Hitt)

Emilie Kryse first noticed her pattern on sidelights of prominent early twentieth century Georgian homes around the VCU campus. As she began looking for similar examples in textiles, she discovered the 'Shippo Tsunagi' pattern, also found on Spoonflower (Figure 6). Emilie immediately noticed that although her pattern was digitally printed, it resembled embroidery. Her research uncovered that the Japanese embroidery style of a running stitch called (sashiko) was commonly used to create this pattern on Japanese kimonos. The name itself derives from both cloisonné techniques of enameling metal work and also referred to Buddhist symbolism. Because of its spiritual associations, her poster highlights the ways in which her pattern can be found in other media.

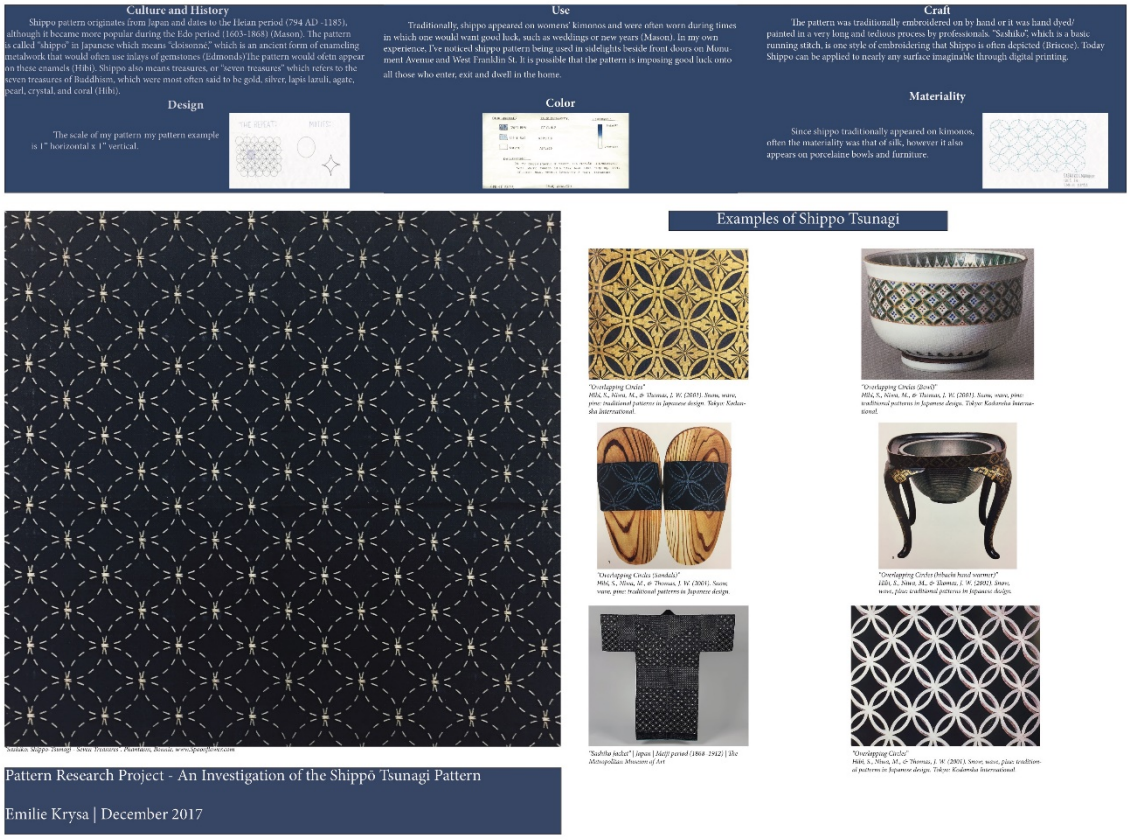

Figure 6: Emilie Krysa, 'Pattern Research Project: An Investigation of the Shippo Tsunagi Pattern' Fall 2017, Poster 18" x 24" (Image courtesy of Emilie Krysa).

Although each student explored craft, materiality, color, culture and history, and use, the way that they chose to focus their research and communicate that graphically was all their own, showcasing the multifaceted nature of historical analysis and the value of storytelling in exploring one's own investigation. In terms of further developing this project, we concluded that an initial pinup halfway through the semester would encourage further exploration and research, while also providing feedback and discussion of the poster design.

During the final presentations, my collaborator Emily Smith and I asked each student what questions they had for further research or how they would want to take this project further. This was a valuable way to conclude their presentations because rather than seeing them as 'complete' or 'comprehensive'—we want them to view this practice similarly to their design process, as a first iteration.

In conclusion, this project provides an opportunity for students to develop their research, observation, and communication skills. Offering a workshop in which I model evaluation and analysis helps to demystify the research process. And further, partnering with other faculty and library staff creates more meaningful and lasting connections for students. To further this initial investigation from their sophomore year, students will create their own patterns in the Materials Studio during their junior year.

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