Learning Objectives

The learning objectives of this unit are:

- Identify the different natural and man-made sources around them as possible starting points for a project.
- Distinguish between motifs / patterns and textures.
- Select an appropriate source of inspiration for a given project.

3.1 Sources of Inspiration

Introduction

The use of inspiration varies in different contexts, but the same fundamental functions of sources of inspiration remain constant for all the different fields. The objective of this unit is to explain the vital importance of sources of inspiration in the design process to non-designers, who might perceive the designers’ study of fashion and artwork as artistic self-indulgence. At the same time, this course can reassure designers that their working style reflects a wider practice in the industry.
At present designers get little support or encouragement to do research. This unit gives straightforward guidelines for how surface embellishment and textile companies can support their designers in their use of sources of inspiration. This unit also provides an overview of the surface embellishment process and explains how sources of inspiration are employed. It also addresses the question of how design performance can be improved through better support of sources of inspiration for surface embellishment in textiles and garments. To a designer anything that sparks off a design idea can be a source of inspiration. Sources of inspiration play a crucial role throughout the whole design process. However, different types of sources are important at different stages.

What is a Source of Inspiration

Anything visual can be a source of inspiration for a design, from a John Galliano garment to a plate of baked beans. Designers are mainly interested in the visual appearance and connotations of the objects, and seldom in the conceptual integrity of the design. Different sources of inspiration can be combined in one garment; a designer garment, a Roman ornament or even a piece of tree bark. Even though the use of sources of inspiration is entirely pragmatic, it is possible to identify different types of sources of inspiration performing different roles.
The importance of effective design management, and the significance of the early stages of the design process, are well recognised in other design-led industries, but little understood in the textile industry. In the textile industry designers use other garments, photographs of garments from history, art objects and natural phenomena as inspiration for their designs.

It is generally recognised that these sources of inspiration help designers to create features of individual designs, such as different textures, motifs and patterns in textile design. But sources of inspiration also play a powerful role at the beginning of the design process, in research and strategic collection planning. They also play an essential role in the communication of design ideas, both among designers and between designers and managers and buyers. Gathering sources of inspiration costs time and money. Many studios and offices attempt to save money by limiting
the designers travelling time to see shops and shows. They also do not purchase forecasting materials.

This has a number of harmful effects on the design process. It reduces the designers’ job satisfaction and accelerates staff turnover. It also limits the range of ideas designers use, so that designs become stereotyped.

The cost of travel to shops and fashion shows and the purchase of art, history, nature books and CD-ROMs is small compared to the potential profit on a successful design. Textiles or fabrics are sold on their visual and tactile appearance. Within the same price bracket customers select on subjective preference; newly purchased garments must look new and modern. Designers in the textile industry are under constant pressure to develop new design ideas. A design must catch the mood of the season. Fashion changes very quickly, and continuously poses new challenges to resources and skills.

In the early 1990s, garments were still mainly sold on patterns and fancy structures. Current fashion demands simple elegant surface embellishments with interesting shapes.

**Design Research**

Design research that is gathering background information for design, including studying current and future fashion trends, defines the range of possibilities for designs within the scope of fashion and the intended target markets. It provides the sources of inspiration designs are based on, and enables designers to relate their designs to the context of fashion.

The quality of designs depends not only on the designers talents, but also on the quality of their design research. Only extensive research enables designers to stay fresh and keep up to date with developments. Many designers gather sources of inspiration in their own time. They look through fashion magazines and art books at home. They go to museums on the weekend or while holidaying, and collect natural objects on Sunday walks.

Most designers I have talked to, have commented that they have to fight to go to shows and on foreign shopping trips, because, these are considered too expensive and time consuming. It is important to note that these research trips are very intensive and exhausting. However, many designers comment that they are also the most productive design times, when they plan most of their collections. Ideas created in this short space of time are used through the year.
Designers are often very unsatisfied because their design research is not valued within a company. They view it as a disregard for their own creative work. Many designers are already frustrated, because the pressures of the market give them little artistic freedom. The turnover of designers in companies can be high.

**Natural Sources as Inspiration**

Many themes take their inspiration from nature. Designers are inspired by animals, plants and other natural objects, as well as natural phenomena such as thunderstorms or sunsets. Designers collect Portable physical objects such as leaves or shells, use photographs or work from memory. Designers never stop looking for sources of inspiration. When they see something suitable they turn it into a design. The inspirational opportunities present in the natural world around us could make an entire post all on their own.
There are literally thousands, if not millions, of things to be inspired by around the world and in our own backyards. Birds, trees, animals, bugs, the sky, mountains, valleys, deserts, rivers, lakes, the list could go on forever. When you are lacking inspiration, try taking a walk through a nearby field, park, forest or other natural space.
Look around at the shape and texture of things, the colours, the patterns and anything else that catches your eye. You are almost sure to find something you can apply to your projects, if you take the time to look.

Obviously, the natural world is all around us, even if we live in an urban area (just look at grass growing up through cracks in a sidewalk or birds in a park). Here are some ideas for finding even more inspiration. They are Flickr Groups and National Geographic.

**Flickr Groups**
Flickr groups are a great source to find inspiring nature photography. These are a few specific groups to try:

- Spectacular Nature

**National Geographic**
Whether you look through new or old issues, National Geographic is filled with amazing nature photos and stories. There’s plenty of inspiration on their website too.
Lesley Richmond

English textile artist Lesley Richmond is not only a creator, but a teacher as well. Lesley is one of the most widely-represented textile artists in the world. Born in Cornwall, she is now a resident of Vancouver, Canada. Her works have been on display in several countries around the world including, Poland, China, Korea as well as the U. S and Canada. Her work has also been featured in numerous books on the subject of textile art, including Textiles: The Art of Mankind, and Art Textiles of the World – Canada. Lesley’s main inspiration since the beginning of her career has been natural forms. Her mantra is to create pieces that appear organic regardless of the material that has been used. In particular, she is inspired by trees and forest.

Two of her most popular series are in fact named Leaf and Distant Forest. Her current series is entitled Tree / Forest. For each of these series, Lesley harnessed her photography skills, snapping pictures of trees and forests. Then she had them printed on the fibres, editing them to filter out the background. As a result, the pieces she creates appear visually appealing and incredibly detailed.

Healy and Burke

Slobhan Healy and Mai-read Burke are both Irish artists and for the past several years they have been working together to create textile art that astounds viewers. Their practice is fairly unique; when working on a new piece together, they harness their individual skills in a very efficient and creative way. Slobhan focuses more on finalizing the design and inspiration, while Mai-read takes care of the colours and materials to be used. Another unusual (though not unique) aspect of their work as textile artists is that the duo works to order, creating custom pieces for their clients on commission. Their focus is on producing top quality felted pieces. Through their tried and tested methods they have built a loyal following and an impressive body of work.

History as Inspiration

Designers look for repeat patterns, ornaments and motifs. Other textiles are often used as sources of inspiration for patterns. They provide rich sources of ornamental patterns, for example in embroideries, rugs or tie patterns.
All other design objects with patterns such as tiles and mosaics, serve as sources of inspiration. Designers frequently use historic designs such as William Morris wallpaper, and fine art can also provide a rich source. Everyday objects such as sweet wrappers are also useful. Some designers also use historic garments as inspirations, most famously Vivienne Westwood. Some companies have archives of their own old designs or antique garments bought in from other sources. The world of architecture and interior design holds a huge variety of potential sources of inspiration, and there’s likely an aesthetic style out there for every taste and project. From vernacular architecture to modern minimalism to art deco and everything in between, there’s almost certainly an architectural style out there that can be adapted to your project.

**Architectural Styles**

The number of architectural styles is really astounding, but here are some of the more recent prominent and interesting ones to get you started. They are: Art Nouveau, American Craftsman, Prairie School, Art Deco, International Style, Mid-Century Modern, and Post Modern.

**Art Nouveau**

A popular style around the turn of the 20th century (roughly 1890 – 1905) that fell out of style as the modernist movement took hold. The style is defined by violent curves (often called “whiplash” motifs) and dynamic, undulating flowing lines. It was one of the inspirations for the psychedelic art movement of the 1960s. A great example of Art Nouveau architecture is the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest.

**American Craftsman**
Also known as American Arts & Crafts, it was popular in the late 19th century through the beginning of the 20th century, and still enjoys revivals to the present day. It emphasized locally crafted wood, glass and metal work that combined simplicity with elegance. Great examples can be in numerous Craftsman-style bungalows across the United States.

**Prairie School**

Prairie school designs, which were popular in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries, generally include a lot of horizontal lines, a desire to blend with the surrounding landscape and discipline in the use of ornamentation. Frank Lloyd Wright’s Oak Park, Illinois home is a great example, as is the Woodbury County Courthouse in Iowa.

**Art Deco**

This was a popular design movement between 1925 throughout the 1940s. It was seen as glamorous, elegant, modern and functional at the time. The City Hall of Buffalo New York and the spire of the Chrysler Building in New York City are both prime examples.

**International Style**

This was a major style in the 1920s and 1930s, at the beginning of the modernist movement. A strict set of design rules is one of the key components of international style. Villa Savoye by Le Corbusier and the Glass Palace (in Heerlen, The Netherlands) are both great examples.

**Mid-Century Modern**

A design style developed between roughly 1933 and 1965, and is a further development of both Frank Lloyd Wright’s principles and Bauhaus architecture. It is more organic and less formal than international style. Prominent proponents included Joseph Eichler and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The Transamerica Pyramid in San Francisco and the Concourse Building in Singapore are both good examples.

**Postmodern**

An international style movement that started in the 1970s (with roots as far back as the 1950s). It is not as formal as the international style and has more ornamentation. The Bank of America Center in Houston, Texas is a good example of postmodern architecture.

**Man-made Sources of Inspiration**

Designers attend fashion shows, such as Premier Vision and yarn shows, mainly Pitti Filati and Expofil. On the same trips they go shopping in the great fashion centres of the world, such as New York, Paris, Milan or London. Designers study garments ranging from the designs of the great couturiers to high street fashion slightly more upmarket than their own target product. They
also study competitors’ garments to gauge their own designs and extract information about production methods. Designers always keep their eyes open for interesting garments. They watch people on the streets or at parties; and take inspiration from street fashion. In the course of studying garments, designers recognize shape details and motifs as prominent or ubiquitous in a season and apply them in their new designs.

**Inspiration from Photographs**

All designers study fashion photographs in magazines. A photograph rarely shows details as clearly as the real thing. However, it provides a clear indication of the mood of the garment, its context within a collection and the projected image of the target customer. Fashion photographs enables the designers to gauge their understanding of the Zeitgeist.

**3.2 Motifs, Patterns and Texture**

**Motifs**

In fashion, a motif is an element of a pattern, image or theme. A motif may be repeated in a design or composition, often many times, or may just occur once in a work. A motif may be an element in the iconography of a particular subject or type of subject that is seen in other works.

Ornamental or decorative art can usually be analysed into a number of different elements, which can be called motifs. These may often, as in textile art, be repeated many times in a pattern. Important examples in Western art include acanthus, egg and dart and various types of scrollwork. Many designs in mosques in Islamic culture are motifs, including some of the sun, moon, animals such as horses and lions, flowers and landscapes. Motifs can have emotional effects and be used for propaganda.

**Patterns**

A pattern, apart from the term’s use to mean “Template”, is a discernible regularity in the world or in a manmade design. As such, the elements of a pattern repeat in a predictable manner. A geometric pattern is a kind of pattern formed of geometric shapes and typically repeating like in wallpaper. Any of the five senses may directly observe patterns. Conversely, abstract patterns in science, mathematics of language, may be observable only by analysis. Direct observation in practice means, seeing visual patterns, which are widespread in nature and art.

Visual patterns in nature are often chaotic, never exactly repeating, and often involve fractals. Nature patterns include spirals, meanders, waves, foams, tilings, cracks and those created by symmetries of rotation and reflection. Patterns have an underlying mathematical structure; indeed, mathematics can be seen as the search for regularities, and the output of any function is a mathematical pattern.
In the sciences, theories explain and predict regularities in the world.

In art and architecture, decorations or visual motifs may be combined and repeated to form patterns designed to have a chosen effect on the viewer.

In Computer Science, a software design pattern is a known solution to a class of problems in programming.

In fashion, the pattern is a template used to create any number of similar garments.

Patterns in Nature

Nature provides examples of many kinds of patterns, including symmetries, trees and other structures with a fractal dimension, spirals, meanders, waves, foams, tilings, cracks and stripes.
Symmetry

Symmetry is widespread in living things. Animals that move usually have bilateral or mirror symmetry as this favours movement. Plants often have radial or rotational symmetry, as do many flowers, as well as animals which are largely static as adults, such as sea anemones. Five-fold symmetry is found in the echinoderms, including starfish, sea urchins and sea lilies.

Among non-living things, snowflakes have striking six-fold symmetry; each flake is unique, its structure recording the varying conditions during its crystallisation similarly each on its six arms. Crystals have a highly specific set of possible crystal symmetries; they can be cubic or octahedral, but cannot have five-fold symmetry (unlike quasicrystals).

Spirals

Spiral patterns are found in the body plans of animals including molluscs such as the nautilus, and in the phyllotaxis of many plants, both of leaves spiraling around stems, and in the multiple spirals found in flower heads such as the sunflower and fruit structures such as the pineapple.

Chaos, Flow, Meanders

Chaos theory predicts that while the laws of physics are deterministic, events and patterns in nature never exactly repeat because extremely small differences in starting conditions can lead to widely differing outcomes. Many natural patterns are shaped by this apparent randomness, including vortex streets, and other effects of turbulent flow such as meanders in rivers.
Waves and Dunes

Waves are disturbances that carry energy as they move. Mechanical waves propagate through a medium – air or water, making it oscillate as they pass by. Wind waves are surface waves that create the chaotic patterns of the sea. As they pass over sand, such waves create patterns or ripples. Similarly, as the wind passes over sand, it creates patterns of dunes.

Bubbles and Foam

Foams obey Plateau’s laws which require films to be smooth and continuous, and to have a constant average curvature. Foam and bubble patterns occur widely in nature, for example in radiolarians, sponge spicules and the skeletons of Silico flagellates and sea urchins.
Shrinkage Cracks

Cracks form in materials to relieve stress; with 120° joints in elastic materials, but at 90° in inelastic materials. Thus the pattern of cracks indicates whether the material is elastic or not. Cracking patterns are widespread in nature, for example in rocks, mud, tree bark and the glazes of old paintings and ceramics.

Spots and Stripes
Alan Turing and later the mathematical biologist James Murray, described a mechanism that spontaneously creates spotted or striped patterns, for example in the skin of mammals or the plumage of birds: a reaction-diffusion system involving two counter-acting chemical mechanisms, one that activates and one that inhibits a development, such as of dark pigment in the skin. These patterns slowly drift, the animals’ appearance changing imperceptibly as Turing predicted.

Textures

Texture is the perceived surface quality of a work of art. It is an element of two-dimensional and three-dimensional design and is distinguished by its perceived visual and physical properties. Use of texture, along with other elements of design, can convey a variety of messages and emotions. There are two varieties of textures: Physical texture and Visual texture.

Physical Texture

Physical texture also known as actual texture or tactile texture, are the actual variations upon a surface. This can include, but is not limited to, fur, wood, grain, sand, smooth surface of canvas or metal, glass and leather.

It differentiates itself from visual texture by having a physical quality that can be felt by touch. Specific use of a texture can affect the smoothness that an artwork conveys. For instance, use of rough surfaces can be visually active, whilst smooth surfaces can be visually restful. The use of both can give a sense of personality to a design or utilized to create emphasis, rhythm or contrast.

The Importance of Light

Light is an important factor for physical artwork, because it can affect how a surface is viewed. Strong lights on a smooth surface can obscure the readability of a drawing or photograph, whilst they can create strong contrasts in a highly textural surface such as moose or pigs.

Visual Texture

Visual texture is the illusion of having physical texture. Every material and every support surface has its own visual texture and needs to be taken into consideration before creating a composition. As such, materials such as canvas and watercolour paper are considerably rougher than, for example, photo-quality computer paper and may not be best suited for creating flat, smooth texture.
Photography, drawings and painting use visual texture both to portray their subject matter realistically and with interpretation. Texture in these media are generally created by the repetition of shape and line.

**Hyper Texture**

Hyper texture can be defined as both “realistic simulated, surface texture, produced by adding, small distortions, across the surface of an object” and a new avenue for describing the fluid, morphic nature of texture in the realm of cyber graphics and the transversally responsive works created in the field of visual arts.

**3.3 Selection of Sources of Inspiration**

This project contains a clear link between real world sources of inspiration (such as the jellyfish) and conceptual designs.

It includes a superb range of techniques, (the white on black work, completed by blowing white ink through a straw) and drawings upon found surfaces (such as the gridded maths paper).

Amber demonstrates an awesome variation of line weight in this work – using a simple medium to great effect.
This project has a formal, organized, uncluttered presentation style, with a minimal use of colour. Items are positioned carefully, allowing each piece of the design process to be appreciated fully. The project contains a thorough investigation of detail and pattern, with first-hand observation, of moths and butterflies, informing subsequent designs.

This project is a place for testing and refining ideas. This page shows experimentation with several textile techniques, such as using a heat press, machine embroidery and boning. This allows a student to demonstrate an understanding of properties of materials and techniques, and to investigate how these can be used for their project.

Each of these textile samples are derived from textures observed first-hand. In this case, the absence of colour, focuses attention solely upon the surface qualities of the materials.
This project has a confident, analytical, graphical style. The project boasts clever and bold heading colours, which link to the design, without dominating the page.

The inclusion of photographs helps to inform and illustrate stages of development (however, students should be careful they do not use this space-fill), considering pattern, form and colour alternatives.
3.4 Conclusion

To summarize, in this unit you have learnt to identify the different natural and man-made sources as possible starting points for a project. You also learnt to distinguish between motifs, patterns and textures. This will help you select an appropriate source of inspiration for a given project.