

The Sampling Project: Making in Response to Archival Collections

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Abstract:

Textile archives are places filled with material narratives. Some archival artefacts hold fully documented, clearly identifiable stories, like a complete novel or biography, while other fragments of material are mere phrases. This incomplete narrative provided by historical objects offers great scope for creative enquiry and imaginative interpretation of archive material.

This research focusses on textile archive collections related to art and design schools in the UK and Europe and how they can be the catalyst for new research and practice in contemporary textiles. It explores a range of ways in which textile collections, and in particular Japanese katagami printing stencils, can inspire, inform and promote creative enquiry. The purpose of this work is to examine the historical textile archive collections and their relevance to creative practice and practice-based research through sampling and making.

Firsthand archival research was carried out by first at Tissuethèque archive, Roubaix, France and then at Bradford Textile Archive, Bradford College, Bradford, UK. Initial imagery and notes from discussions with colleagues was collected and developed through individual visual development in sketchbooks. Practical textile sampling explored a variety of different fibres, fabrics, natural dyes, mordants, screen print and stitch processes. This research was based on an empirical approach to testing of materials and processes, helping to highlight the importance of the sampling process to creative textiles practice. In this case sampling was a way of exploring material and technique, but also of better understanding the katagami stencils and how they relate to European printing and dyeing methods. The research highlights the importance of risk taking and the value of making mistakes to inform creative practice.

Introduction

Until quite recently I had neither seen a katagami or knew what one was. The Sampling Project came about after an Erasmus funded visit to Roubaix, France and a visit to the Tissuthèque textile archives, where I was shown a large heavy bound volume dated 1896 (fig. 1). It contained page after page of mounted Japanese paper stencils. Marvelling at the intricate designs there was an immediate visual appeal as well as a curiosity; *what were these beautiful stencils for, how did they work, how were they made and how did they come to be in this collection?* Initial reading and research yielded a basic understanding of the katazome process and historical context of katagami as well as opening up the subject up as a source for creative investigation. This eventually led to devising ‘The Sampling Project’ as a practice-led research project.



Fig. 1 Katagami volume at Tissuthèque archive, Roubaix, France.

Incomplete Narratives - archives as catalyst

As a textile practitioner, artist and lecturer I have a long-held interest in the use of textile archives and historical textiles as a source for creative stimulus. I have also used

historical textile material extensively as a teaching resource with my undergraduate students. Learning in museums and archives is experiential and transformative. It enables direct engagement with the senses and encourages deep learning, especially when research takes place by visually exploring, for example by drawing, or by physical handling or experience of objects.

Many important design archives and collections originated as a resource for the teaching of design and especially textile design in the 19th century. The collections that now form Tissuthèque, Roubaix being a typical example, another ‘the museum’ of Bradford Technical College (fig. 2), now part of Bradford College textile archive. Items were collected for their value either as technical source material, for example innovative fabric constructions, or for their value as an educational design source, to be copied from or studied, as in the case of this volume of katagami. The label on the spine indicates that it was once in the collection of the the École Nationale, Arts Industriels de Roubaix (national school of industrial arts of Roubaix) and describes the contents as ‘*200 dessins d’origine Japonaise*’ (200 drawings of Japanese origin). No further contextual annotation is given in the book, either to explain what the objects are or specifically where they came from.



Fig. 2 ‘The Museum’ at Bradford Technical College, late 19th century

During this period historical and ethnographic textiles were collected for study, either in the form of sample books or fragments cut from clothing or household textiles. These fabrics are often missing any kind of provenance or context because this information was not deemed important at the time of collecting. It could be argued that this incomplete story actually makes it easier for a designer to re-imagine elements of the past for a contemporary audience, the unknown narrative providing space for the imagination to take flight. Katagami in these collections were and are viewed out of their original context, the stencils viewed as patterns in their own right rather than as tools, the original design symbolism lost to European eyes then as now.

Archival textile material is widely used in the textile industry as a design resource, although this is less often publicly acknowledged. As Britt, Stephan-Cran & Bremner found (2013) there has been a scarcity of writing about how textile archives are used to inspire the creation of new textile designs. However the use of historical design references once kept out of the public domain is increasingly being revealed. In his recent book 'Patterns' (Koepke, 2016) a series of examples demonstrate how companies have used specific items from 'The Design Library' to inspire new designs. Koepke explains the range of approaches his clients might take to archival designs;

The designs ultimately selected may simply initiate the client's journey of inspiration and direction, or they may find a direct, literal reuse, appearing on a new product much as they did originally. (Koepke 2016: 11)

This new openness perhaps reflecting the important role of heritage as a marketable asset in fashion and design.

In The Sampling Project archival research into katagami provided the starting point or catalyst for further research and investigation, rather than as a more direct source of imagery. The design source providing an initial 'way in' to an exploration of print, pattern and surface, inspiring a focus on flat pattern and negative space.

The Paper Stencil

Stencil dyeing and particularly katazome has been suggested as the precursor and possible inspiration for European silk-screen printing (Storey 1974) and there are indeed striking resemblances. Both processes involve a stencil-like design with a pattern of

holes that are printed through. However in katazome it is resist paste (to block dye) rather than dye or print medium that is printed through, meaning that the two processes are in fact opposite. I was interested in using screen printing techniques as a method of exploring stencil effects.

I was especially drawn to those stencils with large open areas in the designs and those made up of striped designs. These stencils known as *ito-ire* (thread insertion) were reinforced with a net of fine silk threads sandwiched between the laminated paper. Some of the stencils in the Tissuthèque archive are damaged from use, others have been carefully mended, with a new network of stitches holding the stencil together. Areas of the thread mesh have become distorted and broken and some of the paper elements have also become detached, the finely detailed patterning and the imperfect damaged sections coexisting in the same piece. In his book on mudlarking in London, Ted Sandling describes the attraction of broken pottery shards as '*beautiful only in fragment...the perfect metaphor for humanity*' (2016: 49), suggesting that a small portion of imperfect pattern is aesthetically far superior to the perfect whole. The Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* also includes the idea of imperfection as a special form of beauty, embracing the spiritual value of impermanence and decay (Koren 1994). These stencils would ordinarily have been discarded or recycled in normal textile production, instead they have been carefully preserved in European museums, suspended in time.

I was initially drawn to the creative potential of stitch as a means to create lace-like fabrics or 'stitches in the air' inspired by the *ito-ire*. There were also wider possibilities for investigating material qualities of broken threads, surfaces and structures in combination with detailed surface pattern. It was never the intention to imitate the designs or use of katagami. I was interested in the possibilities for combining dyeing, printing and stitch to create multi-layered textiles.

Changing Attitudes to Control

Around the time I began researching katagami, I attended a meeting of the 62 Group of Textile Artists regarding a new exhibition that would challenge the members (myself included) to push the boundaries of their practice. The exhibition brief for '*CTRL/shift*' asked members to explore shifts and changes in practice, including '*changing attitudes*

to control; the introduction of new materials and techniques; and/or the impact of innovative ideas and evolving technologies' (62 Group, 2018). I chose to adopt this concept of shifting attitudes to control and apply it to my katagami inspired work. Marr & Hayes (2016) describe this as '*unlearning*' an approach to setting aside pre-existing textiles knowledge to push the boundaries with process. By taking an open-ended approach the project aimed to introduce an element of risk taking that would allow for a greater than usual range of outcomes to be produced. On the one hand The Sampling Project was about introducing control, by instigating a systematic approach to making, yet on the other it was about loss of control, as the outcomes were at the mercy of my self-imposed system. The intention was that the sampling process would be creatively stimulating and that the outcomes (textile samples) would be significant pieces in their own right, rather than as a means to a more resolved end. Failure was an intended outcome and this was to be embraced as a positive aspect of learning from the project.

Material & Method

In the Sampling project material plays a pivotal role. Marr & Hayes describe materials as '*an active source of information*' (2016: 29) suggesting that by directly manipulating materials we create new knowledge. By handling and working with materials we engage the senses, encouraging haptic appreciation that taps into a deeper, tacit understanding of material properties, switching on to the possibilities of manipulating and transforming materials.

A series of systematic experiments were devised to test different combinations of fabrics, mordants, dye, print and stitch methods. A table was created (fig. 3) to record quantitative lateral testing of different material and process combinations. The body of work comprised thirty samples. Materials choices were selected for their thin paper-like qualities that seemed appropriate to the aesthetic of the katagami. Colours were limited to two kinds of natural dye, madder and logwood, which could be combined with iron mordant, deliberately chosen in response to the rich brown and dark inky colours observed in the paper of the katagami stencils.

	iron mordant paste pr	no pr - mordant	madder dye bath	logwood dye bath	stitch	lavender print	dyer's print	lavender	iron mordant bath	washed (lavender)
1. viscose/silk radine (on front) ✓			over dye	✓		✓				
2. viscose/silk radine (on back) ✓			✓	over dye		✓				
3. organza satin silk ✓	✓		✓							
4. organza satin silk ✓	✓			✓						
5. silk/viscose satin ✓	✓		✓			✓				
6. cotton/silk Tencel ✓	✓			✓		✓				
7. cotton/silk Tencel ✓	✓		✓		✓	✓				
8. silk/viscose georgette (Roman) ✓	✓		over dye	✓		✓				
9. silk/viscose georgette (Roman) ✓	✓		✓	over dye		✓				
10. wedding dress silk ✓	✓		✓							
11. wedding dress silk ✓	✓			✓						
12. Acetate polyester/cotton ✓	✓			✓		✓		✓		
13. Acetate polyester/cotton ✓	✓		✓			✓		✓		
14. old linen sheeting / mordant bath after dyeing ✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
15. old linen sheeting / mordant bath after dyeing ✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
16. viscose silk radine ✓	✓			✓						

Fig3. Table used for planning materials and processes for sampling

In preparation for the printing processes photo-stencils were prepared on screens with simple positive or negative grid patterns of different scales, whilst some designs were created spontaneously and intuitively on the day of printing with fresh plant material, collected from the grounds surrounding the art school, used to create a resist used in conjunction with an open (blank) screen. The was a response to the importance of nature and the seasons in Japanese designs. However where traditional Japanese patterns are often highly stylised or symbolic, focussing on flat patterns and controlled shapes, my own aesthetic preference is for naturalistic shapes and organic free-form patterns. I chose to observe katagami pattern influences only very loosely.

Research Outcomes

The body of thirty textile samples were reviewed, pinning the samples up in the studio to see them as a whole body of work. At this stage there were a wider range of colours and also a good number of plain, un-patterned fabrics, as seen in fig. 4. Additional overlaid processes subsequently obliterated some of these existing patterns,

disappearing beneath over-dyeing or mordanting, whilst other pieces developed more complex patterns and surface or structural effects as shown in fig. 5.



Fig 4. Dyed samples after initial batch of processes



Fig 5. Samples after devoré processes were applied to some samples.

Failures, mistakes or happy accidents?

The open-ended investigation of material and processes in The Sampling Project was always intended to throw up failures and negative results. The planned scheme of sampling deliberately included combinations of material and process that were expected to either show no result at all such as devoré onto protein fabrics, or to result in complete disintegration of a material for example devoré on 100% viscose satin. As Dickens (2012) points out;

Research results in innovation and this in turn, also throws up failed attempts along the way. Failures, therefore, are as useful as the successes if they are appreciated within the context of learning.

Embracing failure is an important principle of research and learning in design. The iterative design methodology commonly encouraged in design education at undergraduate level is based on a cycle of prototyping, testing, reflection and refining the product or process. This might be simply by finding out what does not work or by finding unexpected results that can be exploited. Various iterations may ultimately lead to a successful outcome or the reflection that takes place due to grappling with failure may actually improve our ability to cope with ambiguity (Smith & Henriksen, 2016). While failed attempts can help us to refine a designed object Smith and Henriksen also suggest that *'failure is sometimes an end itself in the work of creative practitioners'*. The devoré samples would certainly fit this description, pushing the limitations by destroying fibres to the extent that the fabric no longer holds together and needs alternative support, as in fig. 6.



Fig. 6 Devore on mixed silk/cotton mix with silk stitching

In theory all results should have been equally important but in reality aesthetic considerations became compelling. The stunning red samples dyed simply with madder, were too bright, the plain samples lacking in interest, the whole worked as a set of technical samples but not as a creative response to the katagami. It became apparent that two conflicting objectives were at play;

- to investigate material and process in open-ended research, and
- to create textile samples with the 'look' of katagami.

The lack of a clear system for reviewing outcomes meant judging their success on a rather subjective basis.

In the context of higher education student work is constantly assessed. But within this assessment focussed system of education is there space to really push the boundaries if that means making mistakes? If all your textile samples go up in smoke, will you still be rewarded for the learning that has taken place? Is risk-taking rewarded or is it inadvertently restricted by the need to produce fit-for-purpose, on trend, on brand outcomes? Smith and Henriksen (2016) argue that grading descriptors that focus solely

on the end product are in danger of overlooking the creative learning that has taken place and that this *'can damage a pedagogy of play and creative experimentation, in which fears of "failure" or low grades and negative judgements wreck the potential of the experience'*. In the Sampling Project I found enormous value in open-ended research and the ability to choose how to assess the success of my textile samples.

Example vs sample

The conflicting objectives in relation to research outcomes can be considered in light of the differing items we describe as textile samples.

1. Sample as a record of textiles experimentation, testing and development. E.G. dye notebooks - Used for research and learning, communicating internally
2. Sample as a typical example used for promotion or selling of textile designs. E.g. Sample book. To present publicly as a good example or for promotion.

These two kinds of sample have very different roles. On one hand we are looking for the outliers, the oddballs, the unexpected discovery, and on the other we want to present resolved outcomes (i.e. colour, pattern) and we want things to look good together. The two ideas are at odds with each other.

With *the Sampling Project* the intention was to experiment systematically to produce a set of samples that demonstrated the research that had taken place, however it was also the intention to take aesthetic direction from the source of the katagami research. As a textile artist and researcher I felt conflicted; compelled to create pieces that were attractive, it was tempting to try to improve on aesthetically disappointing results rather than simply accept and move on. By trying to make beautiful textile pieces I felt that I may be distracting from the importance of making important textile experiments;

the aesthetic coherence or 'beauty' of an artifact can sometimes belie its cleverness, masking the complexity of the processes from which they result and making it seem somewhat indulgent (Morrow 2014)

After reviewing the initial collection of samples the decision was made to deviate slightly from the original scheme, adding to the existing pieces. I continued to layer

additional processes in order to achieve a more coherent aesthetic. Results that would have been unremarkable have in some cases been over-dyed or printed with modifier to change colours. Aesthetic decisions and a certain degree of serendipity became a part of the project as it evolved, disrupting the controlled approach that was fundamental at the start of the project. This could be deemed to be a failure in the project, a veering away from the aims and objectives and a U-turn with regard to the idea of control as a means of opening out possibilities. But it could also be looked at as a great success. The initial research plan did what was needed; it instigated open-ended research of processes, learning took place through material manipulation, research opened out new possibilities. Crucially the project has helped to highlight the importance of the sampling process to creative textiles practice.

Conclusion

The Sampling Project has offered an opportunity to study the processes involved in utilising archives as a source for new creative ideas. Historical katagami provided the stimulus for an entirely new body of work and materials investigation, as well as an increased knowledge base. The project helped to highlight the role of sampling as a means of creating new knowledge and developing a technical resource. The value of the outcomes, both intended and unintended was vast and felt like just scratching the surface of the possibilities.

As well as learning from my own making I have become aware of the possibilities that may arise from sharing this with others, including students and academic colleagues. The textile samples have been re-configured and will be presented as an installation artwork to be exhibited as part of *CTRL/shift* at Midlands Arts Centre (MAC) in 2018.



Fig. 7 Hannah Lamb *The Sampling Project*, 2018 (detail of installation work)

The Sampling Project will be exhibited in the forthcoming 62 Group exhibition *CTRL/shift* at MAC, Birmingham 21 July to 9 September 2018.

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