

Search, Find and Connect: Visual Research in Fashion and Textile  
Education and Implications for Pedagogy  
**Executive summary, September 2009**

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### **Background**

This thesis set out to examine the practice of visual research in Fashion and Textile Design education with particular emphasis on the Victoria and Albert Museum as a source of learning in design. This study is unique and multidisciplinary both in its methodology and contribution to design studies and museum pedagogy. A key aim of this project has been to formulate a methodological framework or a theory for visual research which can inform studio-centred research pedagogy. The 2008 Research Assessment Exercise confirmed the lack of high quality pedagogic research within art and design, exemplifying the need for this type of inquiry.

### **Research conducted**

The framework is developed from data collected in a longitudinal ethnographic study of fashion and textile design students as they have progressed over the first two years of their undergraduate course. Substantial and rich empirical evidence has been gathered since October 2007 in the form of over 110 interviews with eighteen participants. In addition, the study is informed by interviews with staff, document analysis, in situ observation, accompanied museums visits and the results of a quantitative survey.

### **Findings**

A key finding is how the practice of visual research becomes a site and a process through which students explore and construct their social and personal identities. This project is informed by Vygotsky's constructivist and socio-cultural theory of learning, where development is considered in a social, cultural and historical context. Thus, the student's collated research, for instance in the form of a sketchbook, is a cultural tool through which the student develops and constructs a sense of self informed by his/her social environments.

Further, 'visual research' can be perceived as a mapping of a trajectory. The mapping analogy is potent in articulating what visual research 'does', or has the potential to do, distinguishing between mapping –a transformation, and tracing –a reproduction (Corner 2000 developed from Deleuze and Guattari 1980). This distinction echoes Drew, Bailey and Shreeve's findings of fashion students' surface to deep approaches to the design project (2002, 2004). However, my research extends this study and goes beyond 'deep' to 'surface' classifications to investigate how learning is constructed over time and significantly disentangles the complex webs which allow or obstruct a transformational visual research process.

Pertaining to debates concerning visual interrogation as a legitimate mode of inquiry in art and design, the outcomes of my research to date demonstrates that visual research has the potential to be transformative, rigorous and empowering. Factors which enable this include:

- Approaches to learning
- Motivation
- Social learning spaces and opportunities for self-directed practice
- A critical and constructive dialogue with tutors
- Conditions allowing 'play'

Factors which may obstruct transformative potential include:

- Lack of awareness of appropriateness of various methods and sources of research
- Surface learning encouraged through perceived emphasis on quantity rather than critical, in depth engagement
- Missing links between different course components, between skills and conceptual development
- Confusing and contradictory ideas of the purpose of visual research.

Sources, methods and the student-researcher direct, enable and negate transformational research practices through their physical, metaphysical and social circumstances; they operate in triangular, mutually influencing configurations. Central to this research are museums as potential sources for visual research, where the V&A forms the key case study. Here I explore students' experiences of creative practice within museums, relationships between student, institution and museum objects and again between objects, interpretation and representation. In examining issues preventing or enabling students' creative engagement with museums, this project seeks direct application of the findings to lived reality and experience.

## **Conclusion**

My study is profoundly multidisciplinary, drawing on material culture and museum studies, design studies, pedagogic and psychoanalytical theory, ethnography and visual culture studies. This multidisciplinary, along with the study's research focus and original and rigorous methods offers an innovative contribution to these fields in relation to creative practice. By articulating a theory of visual research in fashion and textile design education, this study aims to develop and influence design pedagogy and creative practice and also to impact on educational policy and development. Finally it seeks to empower design students, recognising the personally and socially transformative potential of their work.