Sarah Desmarais - Final MoDA katagami symposium talk

SLIDE 1 Title slide

*in conversation with moda’s katagami:*

*a material dialogue initiated through making by hand*

In this presentation, I’m going to talk about my contribution to this project, which involved hand making as a way of creating a dialogue between MoDA’s katagami and student artists and designers who were curious about them. I’ll describe how I used an auto-ethnographic study of my own practice using the materials of katazome to inform the design of a three-day workshop for art and design students at Middlesex University. Using feedback from this workshop, I hope to show how the act of making itself shed light on social, material and aesthetic aspects of MoDA’s katagami. Along the way I’ll touch on the challenges that arise when artists and designers look for inspiration from objects in museum collections - objects that sometimes seem to be mute, or speaking a foreign language, or unwilling to give up their secrets.

Slide 2 Museum of London students

As noted by Zoe Hendon and Linda Sandino in a forthcoming paper, the term inspiration is shorthand in the heritage sector and elsewhere for the experience of uplift and creative stimulation that museum collections potentially provide, whether to artists and designers, students or the general public. Little is conveyed in this term, however, about how inspiration happens. Our cultural ideas about inspiration are quite contradictory. Frequently, we describe ourselves as waiting, passively, for inspiration to show up – ‘I’m just not feeling inspired’. But, inspiration may also be described in the forceful, appropriative terms used by Picasso when he claimed that ‘mediocre artists borrow’ whilst ‘great artists steal’.

Art students are encouraged to continually seek out sources of inspiration, often through accessing the master works and intriguing artefacts housed in museums. In an ideal world, objects in museum collections would be quite willing to give away their secrets. In practice, though, items in collections can be strangely withholding, and may leave the viewer feeling puzzled, overawed or inadequate. Research confirms that art and design students vary enormously in their capacity to use museums as sources of inspiration. A 2008 qualitative study based on interviews with students from Brighton University and the Royal College of Art (Reading) reported that some students found it hard to engage at all with collections. Other students were able to carry out visual research independently, but this was often limited to looking, photographing and production of written notes. Drawing was resisted through lack of confidence and the difficulties of working in public. Students described their search strategies as ‘hit and miss’, with an emphasis on the quantity rather than quality of information collected. In general the processes of information gathering and making were entirely separate, and subsequent analysis often took place through digital means like Photoshop. Such research is consistent with observations from staff at MoDA suggesting that while student visitors are impressed by the katagami, their engagement with them is often brief and fairly superficial – they are more likely to use a camera for recording the experience than a sketchbook – and they rarely go ‘beyond simply seeing them as examples of interesting motifs, or of stencilling technique’; something stands in the way of a reflective, critical or creative engagement.

Slide 3 – image of katagami

I think it’s unsurprising if art students sometimes wonder what they are supposed to do with artefacts in collections. A visitor to MoDA wishing to look at the katagami, for instance, is presented with one or more of a total of four large cardboard boxes. Each box opens to reveal a stack of one hundred or so stencils, each housed in a plastic wallet. The impression is overwhelming; every stencil is carved with extraordinary detail and precision, and each is unique.

Slide 4 - Katagami image

At the same time there is an experience of repetition; each stencil contains a similarly proportioned cut-out design of implausible and dizzying detail, and each is isolated in its protective plastic mausoleum. These remnants seem to have achieved a silent, plastic-wrapped immortality. At the same time, the katagami, as tools, have clearly had extraordinary social lives, and are still potentially able inspire new creative expression: they remain ‘actants’, to use Bruno Latour’s term; that is to say they continue to have effects in networks of human and non-human things.

In my initial visits was curious about what might enable the viewer to move away from thinking of the katagami as fascinating but inert, alien and incomprehensible, and towards seeing them as a sources of embodied, technical and theoretical understanding – indeed lively partners in a creative conversation. I wished to initiate and record a dialogue with the katagami through making, and through this to better understand whether and how ‘getting stuck in’ in this way might be of value to students in generating a creative and critical engagement with these objects. As tools, the *katagami* seemed to invite me to use them, although the setting emphatically insisted that I did not. It was straightforward, nonetheless, to reconstruct this print technology using traditional materials, and to explore it through my own work as a textile designer maker.

Slide 5 - autoethnography text

The research method I used can be described as ‘autoethnographic’. Autoethnography is ‘an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience’ (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2010). Data typically take the form of extensive field notes that record subjective experience in fine detail.

Slide 6 - photo of notebook

During many hours of studio-based practice, I worked with a notebook by my side, and recorded as much as I could about what took place as I worked. Making notes in this way produced text fragments rather than a sequential narrative, but was faithful to the type of thinking that takes place whilst making – aleatory, associative and highly subjective. Notes included fine-grained description of my interactions with materials, and a record of my subjective impressions and feeling states. These notes were then analysed, resulting in these themes:

Slide 7 - themes list

**Drawing** as seeing and as thinking

Making as close attention

Slowing things down

**Impatience/frustration**

Care/mindfulness

Pleasure/satisfaction

Excitement

Surprise

**From making to imagining**

**Games and playfulness**

Tricks/craftiness

Tradition/empathy

Learning from materials

Surrender

**Points of translation**

I don’t have time to go into all of them in detail here, so I’ll say something about the ones that most clearly illustrate the impact that drawing and making can have on how we engage with an unfamiliar artefact - those are the ones in bold type here.

Slide 8: drawings

The first important theme concerns the impact of drawing on seeing and thinking. Drawing was the point at which I began my research. In choosing to draw in the museum, I wanted a deep rather than a superficial encounter with the katagami. I sketched, and I also made notes on the drawing process itself. My notes record drawing as a way of seeing: I noted that the full beauty and complexity of each pattern didn’t register until I started to draw, and I was struck by how much more I noticed with a pencil in my hand. It was also clear in my notes that drawing became a means of thinking. For instance, whilst recording a series of katagami in highly simplified thumbnail sketches, I noted that:

Drawing forces a process of sorting and categorisation… To draw a design, you have to understand something about it, reduce it to its component elements.

Drawing served as a means of paying close attention, anchoring my eyes and thought processes in a way impossible when ‘just looking’. Its slowness was a virtue since it created the space in which to think about aesthetic, functional and symbolic aspects of the katagami. While drawing, I started to build hypotheses about, or empathise with, designerly intentions. Whilst I baulked at the task of recording even a small number of katagami on site in this laborious way (‘why not just photograph them and have them for reference at home?’), it was quickly apparent that it felt more rewarding, and instructive, to get to know four or five stencils in some detail, that to flick through them, overloaded or intimidated by their virtuosity and complexity.

Slide 9 - stencils

The second theme I want to explore is frustration, and its effect on understanding how a material technology evolves through negotiations with material stuff. As soon as I started designing and cutting stencils, new questions forced themselves upon me - for instance how thick to make a given line, and whether bridges supporting a particular stencil should be adjacent, or offset. My experimentation was slow and often produced disappointing results. I struggled with the slow pace of work, particularly as a beginner, and frustration was initially my constant companion. The snail’s pace of my progress nonetheless permitted reflection and consolidated learning. I started to note, with pragmatism, that my frustration could teach me something: I wrote on one occasion for instance, ‘Sometimes it tests my patience to sit here doing this. Fingers hurt. In this hurt there is an invitation to work more ergonomically, to forge some kind of harmony with the materials. I start to notice that I’m using unnecessary pressure with the knife’. I started to notice, too, that the antidote to this irritation was an attitude of care and mindfulness; that there was pleasure in caring enough to get it right; and that the state of mind in which it mattered to me whether I cut well and precisely was vastly happier and more satisfying than the state of mind in which it didn’t matter and I was careless and took little risks.

Slide 10 - skirt section printing

The third theme I want to explore is the effect of making on imagination. Alongside my frustration there were multiple pleasures in the work, and one of these was a type of excitement very much connected to the process of inspiration: the striking impact of making upon imagining.

The possibilities that appeared in imagination as I worked were sometimes conceptual or aesthetic and related to designs I wished to produce. Imagination could also be productive in technical terms, since when hands were active, the mind spontaneously generated solutions to practical problems - a repeat that would work on a non-rectangular skirt section for example. This led me to notice all the problem solving evident in MoDA’s katagami - for instance numerous ways of marking the position of the stencil for the next repeat.

This leads on to a further theme, that of games and playfulness. I started to notice how slow process and the particular characteristics of the materials were invitations to engage in particular kinds of games. As an example, the medium, one permitting essentially two tones, challenges the maker to produce variations in tonal range through different kinds of mark making, and the traditional makers of katagami developed this particular game to an extraordinary degree, creating subtle tonal variation through patterning and closely grouped parallel lines. Similarly, the necessity for bridges between cut-out areas, a characteristic feature of stencils, invites a playful attitude concerning how these may become a lively and valuable contribution to the success of the design, rather than an encumbrance to it. Finding that the design games I was drawn to play also occurred in the work of the Japanese stencil carvers, and that these games were to a significant degree elicited by the materials themselves, produced a sense of identification with the traditional makers: I wrote: ‘perhaps one enters into the same state of mind, which seems to be a playful one. Play is the creative response that counterbalances processes that are arduously slow and repetitive.’ This was one of several areas in which I came to understand experientially the role the materials themselves played in producing a particular aesthetic.

The last theme I want to raise from my own notes is that of translation, and how drawing and making helped me understand how design languages evolve as they move between or are influenced by other cultures. In my notes I wrote: ‘Every single translation from one medium to another in this process - pencil to ink to blade to paste - every reiteration of the line in a new medium - is a new translation. The translations at work are multiple and at multiple scales - not only the macro translations from east to west and from west to east, but translations between a host of processes, each with its own idiom and range of expression.’ From this point of view it turned out to be just as instructive to try to express my own design ideas through the medium of the stencil as to copy a Japanese design – I noted that being forced to adapt my own designs to the language of stencils made it absolutely clear what this medium was insisting upon. But even where I aimed to copy a Japanese motif, it was substantially transformed as it was modified through my own handwriting. As Glen Adamson points out in relation to the work of Owen Jones and his *Grammar of Ornament*, ‘sketches and published patterns based on them act as *points of translation’.*

Slide 11 Workshop

I hope you can see how practice itself provided me with new understandings of the katagami and their makers. In order to test the idea that making was helpful for such understanding, I then ran a workshop with a group of ten Middlesex University students, variously makers and fine artists, both undergraduate and postgraduate students. We started off by investigating MoDA’s katagami through drawing. Over three days we then cut stencils, made rice paste, printed samples of silk and cotton with the paste resist, dyed them with indigo, and washed out the paste to produce finished pieces. The enjoyment and enthusiastic engagement of students over the course were self-evident, and they produced great work. In order to understand in greater depth whether making had produced new insight for participants, I asked them at the end to fill in a short questionnaire, and my analysis of the responses produced themes similar to those that emerged from my own practice.

Slide 12 - workshop

Responding to a question about whether making with rice paste and stencils had changed the way they thought about the katagami, students flagged up that a different kind of understanding had been produced, and that this complemented and enlarged what had been learnt factually about the stencils as historical artefacts.  Lots of comments noted the importance of a processual, rather than static, understanding.  They noted the capacity of making processes to fully engage, and the way that this engagement was multi-sensorial.  They reported that this resulted in experiences such as a bodily identification with the traditional makers of the katagami, and a direct understanding of how the materials used were implicated in this particular design aesthetic.

Slide 13 - workshop

Asked whether they had felt inspired by the katagami-based making experience, students reported that making 'frees the imagination' and 'breaks habitual ways of seeing'.  The 'synaesthetic' dimensions of making took the experience beyond purely visual inspiration.  The word 'incorporation' was used again and again, which I think is very helpful - it emphasises the way that inspiration involves a quite bodily integration or metabolisation of something that starts off outside oneself.  This kind of inspiration was related by a number of students to repetition and expansion of the original stimulus, the experience of 'building on' it, and 'doing something with the original' - an obvious merit of object-related making is that this 'doing' that is so central to inspiration is built into the exposure process.  The idea of transformation and extension was applied both to the design and to technique.

Asked whether they expected the experience to impact upon their own work, all students replied in the affirmative, and a number of different types of potential impact were noted.  Students spoke of how the materials themselves suggested new ideas; how new techniques had been added to personal technical repertoires; how technologies, e.g. stencils and 3D printing, might be combined, how new visual languages, e.g. black and white, might lead in new directions; and how curiosity was stimulated about new areas of work, for instance textiles or the crafted object.  Impact was also expressed in terms of personal change, e.g. a new valuing of patience and the 'slow'.

Slide 14 - Piper Shepherd

I also asked if students needed further information from me, and their replies, asking about contemporary artists and designers working in this and related media, suggested that they immediately started to situate themselves in relation to a community of contemporary practitioners, which is to say that the experience created connections across space as well as time. Their responses also indicated that the experience had evoked curiosity about the social lives of these objects, for instance how katazome textiles were and are used, and how they have moved between cultures, exercising a major influence on western design, whilst shaped themselves by non-Japanese design influences. I think it is reasonable to say that this hands-on engagement provided a concrete experience of the way that designed objects circulate in a ‘transnational space of things’, a space whose borders are imaginary, in spite of our habit of thinking of many design languages as culturally pure or distinctive.

I hope you’ll agree that my practice-based research and the workshop feedback provide some insight into why making can generate a lively encounter with artefacts in collections. There is a sense in which objects in museum collections - those things that we tend to think of as speaking in a foreign language, or forever silenced - can be given new voice by reinserting them or their equivalents in the flows of material transformation in which they took shape. Seemingly unresponsive bits of material stuff start to speak for themselves when we explore them through use, and I think that’s a phenomenon worthy of further exploration, both in an art school context and with broader museum audiences.

I also think something is revealed about the value of slow, manual practice, particularly in an art school context which is increasingly digital and fast. It was clear both in my own practice and in the workshop that slow making is conducive to slow reflection, and thus to the development of reflective practice. Alongside making, drawing emerged as an effective means for slow exploration and as a key process through which design idioms become translated into new languages.

Engaged in a slow process of exploration and assimilation, you have time to wonder and perhaps understand why the craftsmen who designed and made these stencils made them as they did; how the use of a stencil imposes a language of figure and ground, positive and negative, and a repertoire of design games concerned with their interplay; how it disposes towards another set of games concerned with the creation of tonal variation; and how languages of design are in a constant process of translation at a global scale but also at the level of the cutting mat, in a process rather like Chinese whispers. There is time to ask oneself, in short, how these objects came to be, and how they exercised, and continue to exert, influence on designers across the globe.

Slide 15 - own recent work