With a Theme, as a Team, for a Client: A Digital Textile Design Commissioned Art Project

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The creative textile design process presents both challenges and opportunities when designing for a client. In addition, as practicing artists and designers in academia, we often question our understanding of and research path toward design that is for decorative rather than for functional purposes. There are few clear research models available, especially when the objective is artwork intended to communicate a specific message defined by a client. This project began when a design faculty member was commissioned to create four large banners for the Newman Center on a large university campus. The center's art committee identified themes based on the coming year's liturgical readings from the Book of Luke. The themes identified were *Outcast*, *Women, Hospitality,* and *Wonder*. All four banners would be introduced to the congregation during Advent. Given the scale of the commission and the short time available, two additional designers, both graduate students, were selected to collaborate on the project. As academic artists/designers, our approach was not only to create a conceptual framework for telling the theme stories, but also to ask whether insight and new knowledge could occur within the parameters of a design commission. Initial questions included: How can we use digital textile design processes and technologies to create blended abstract/photorealistic imagery to evoke a specific theme? Can the theme be both abstract and allow the audience to "see" the designers' visualizations? How can the creative approaches of the team be coordinated? Finally, much of the process would rely on a combination of tacit knowledge and use of reflective practices. How might that best be communicated to both the client and to the broader academic community?

The art/design process changes when it occurs in a group and when a client specifies the creative subject matter. Previous literature has explored design methodologies and procedures that are employed when a client is present (LaBat and Sokoloski, 1999 & Lamb and Kallal, 1992), but is often directed to a design brief for functional products rather than art pieces. Dahl, Chattopadhyay, and Gorn (2001) examined the role of visualization in concept design and the communication difficulties encountered when "imaginative visualization" is employed. They presented a framework for incorporating the visualization process of both designer and client in order to have an outcome satisfactory to all. For this commission, the professor met with the clients for an initial interview to discuss their concepts and visualizations, and any concerns. It was clear from the outset that they wanted the banners to be abstract interpretations and not include traditional iconography or human figures. Otherwise, little additional direction was provided. The initial stages of the creative process were: analysis of the client brief; research to identify visual concepts that might connect to the themes and how they might be translated into abstract forms; and identification of images that would embody the themes.

As a means to identify potential imagery that might appeal to the clients, they were shown a variety of possible beginning points, both raw photographs and blended images from the faculty person's previous artwork. Various color themes and levels of image abstraction were included. In addition, as they were unfamiliar with digital print technology, this provided a clearer understanding of the range of creative possibilities. While it is possible to quickly overwhelm a client with visual possibilities, their responses aided the design team in selecting the type of imagery that would be both appealing and communicate the desired message.

An initial discussion between the professor and the design team led to assignment of the themes of *Outcast* and *Wonder* to the students, and *Women* and *Hospitality* to the professor. General ideas, images and visualization were discussed to assure the banners would work as a group when hung. Ultimately, the team identified a process that relied on analysis of their own visualization, memory and/or tacit knowledge. The decision was made to use digital photography for all four banners, but those designed by the graduate students had a more realistic representation, while the others had imagery that, while identifiable, was more abstract in composition. Colors were discussed, and each banner had a unique color theme. While there was no direct reference to traditional religious iconography, it was deemed essential to undertake some research on religious images and meanings. Thus two of the banners included doves, and, based on the scriptural reading, the *Hospitality* banner included shafts of wheat. *Women* was the most difficult to reach consensus with the clients, in part because they had differing opinions. Ultimately the most abstract, it had a spiral effect that moved toward the center with floral images and warm colors radiating outward, loosely reminiscent of the Sacred Heart. Designers worked independently on ideas and images, keeping visual notes on progress. After each designer was satisfied and had received feedback from the other designers, the professor met with the client to digitally present the banner concepts with at least one variation on each.

The clients provided feedback and suggested some color and image modifications. Once the client was satisfied with all four banners they were digitally printed, stitched to a backing and hung from rods so they could be ceremonially carried into the sanctuary. The clients deemed the project a success, and the banners will be displayed throughout the year. Analysis of the design process suggests that providing the clients some of the same images and visualization techniques used by the designers aided in a successful outcome. In addition, team communication, both oral and visual, was essential.

Bibliography

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