



One thousand two hundred sixty motifs: getting students to draw when they think they can't draw

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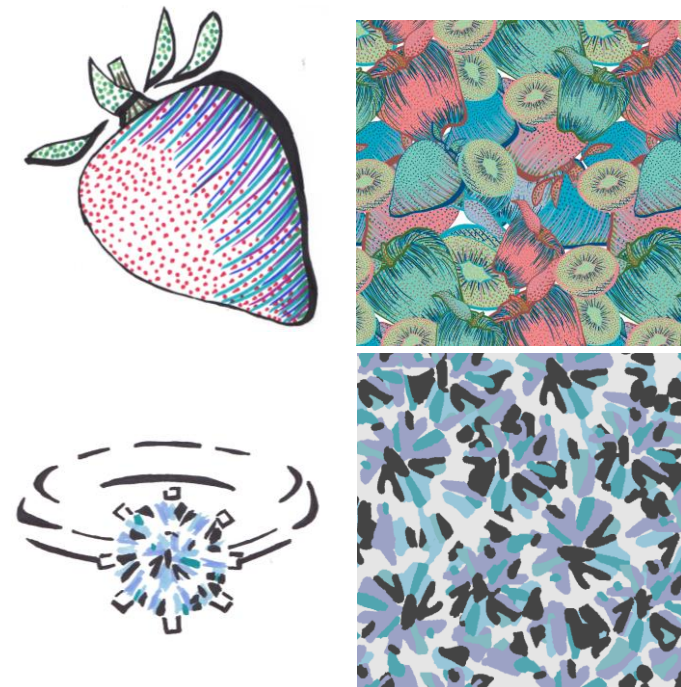
Keywords: drawing, motif, technique, motivation

Introduction: In the first hour of the first day of their first college course, 21 fashion and textile design students fill out a skills assessment in which they respond to the following questions: “Please describe your level of expertise in the following areas. Include descriptions of formal or informal training, favorite applications and media, and areas where you feel improvement is needed.” The four areas are drawing, painting, sewing, and working with computers. It would be reasonable to expect that students who applied to a competitive design program would have some facility in drawing, however in my first semester teaching this class, this skills assessment that while students may have some proficiency, many lack confidence. Typical statements on the skills assessment included: “I have more experience in fashion drawing than any other kind of drawing. Drawing is slightly intimidating to me.” or “I have prior experience in drawing but little instruction” The course is a 6 hour studio, designed to introduce students to “foundational design concepts and methods representative of the creative thought and processes of fashion and textile design disciplines.” I believe that drawing is one of the fundamental tools that a designer can *choose* to employ. I don't think every designer has to be an expert in drawing, but I do think that just about anyone can develop drawing skills with practice and instruction. My graduate school mentor described drawing as a skill that “as you practice you get better, as you get better it becomes more fun, and as it becomes more fun you practice” thus creating a snowball effect of skills building on enjoyment. With this philosophy in mind and 6 hours of studio time in which to work, I decided to create an assignment that would start the snowball rolling.

Strategy: In brief the assignment was to select 5 themes, and draw 3 objects from each theme, each in 5 different styles. The result would be a collection of 60 drawings from each student, each of which could potentially be used as a design motif in a textile print or as a garment design embellishment. In addition to creating their finished drawings, students had to research drawing styles that they could imitate. Groundwork for the assignment was paved from the beginning of the semester through 15-20 minutes of designated drawing time at the beginning of one class period per week. Approaches to different media such as watercolor, marker, gouache, and colored pencil were demonstrated in class through demonstrations and activities that focused on those aspects of drawing that can seem to be unknowable when you don't have experience, such as how to identify areas of light and shadow in an object, and how to then identify the potential for creating light and shadow in your chosen medium. Is that created by making marks of greater

or lesser intensity, as in pencil drawing? Or can you use warm and cool colors to indicate bright and dark? Try using a greyscale to determine where your areas of crosshatching will be densest in a pen-and-ink drawing, and so on. Students seemed to delight in discovering connections between these strategies and the works of great artists they were trying to imitate. The assignment took on the quality of an immersive experience. Students reported feeling like they were “drawing all the time” during the three weeks they had to complete their collection.

Results and ideas for future assignments: When I created this assignment I did not stop to calculate that the result, for me, would be 1,260 drawings to evaluate, but I have never been more happily overwhelmed as when all of these drawings were laid out on the studio tables together. The pride that the students expressed after completing the assignment suggests that their drawing confidence has increased at least somewhat. A follow-up skills assessment at the end of their freshman year will hopefully confirm this. The grading criteria for the assignment focused primarily on process, as students were asked to reflect in their design journals on how they found inspiration for their drawing styles and what challenges they encountered. The only criterion specifically related to drawing was that the student made some attempt through their stylistic approach to indicate volume, light and shadow of the object. It is interesting to note that students were most successful at this in instances where they clearly identified a drawing style to imitate, suggesting that artistic expression can be greatly enhanced through practice in technique. Students used some of the motifs they developed in this assignment for print designs, two of which are shown here. This is definitely an assignment that will be repeated.



Student motifs (left) and print designs (right).