

Like or dislike: Aesthetic judgements on textile patterns

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Abstract: *In different areas of handicraft and textile production, teachers, researchers, purchasers and others have to judge products based on different factors such as function, aesthetics, taste and so on. The whole process of designing – from ideas and visions to finished product – includes aesthetic judgements: In the first planning phase, several sketches are made that can later be changed, adjusted and further developed. When a product is finished, further judgements are needed: designers and artisans evaluate the result of their efforts, teachers judge the works of pupils or students and purchasers or consumers judge the suitability of the textile based on their particular needs. Because different persons make different choices when making or buying a textile product, it is interesting to study people’s experiences of fabrics as well as their reasons for making certain aesthetic judgments. This article presents a study of judgments and values expressed when designed printed fabrics were displayed for designers, teachers of textile crafts, consumers and schoolchildren. The present study shows that subjects make their judgements on the basis of formal, functional, cultural and emotional contents. These aspects should therefore be in focus in design work and design education.*

Keywords: *design, aesthetic judgement, structures of attention, emotion, textile pattern.*

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Background

Design¹ deals with visual elements such as line, colour, texture, shape and form, etc. (Giard 1990; Skjeggstad 2001; Mörk 1994; Wong 1993). Giard (1990) compares these visual elements with the letters of written language, and claims that all designed objects make statements. But because visual language is poorly developed and understood, Giard states that designers should be aware that products only transmit their messages, and that the perception and impact of these messages constitute a neglected field in design. Thus, designers are probably more visually literate than are average users; if someone speaks a language unknown to you, you can hear but not understand him (Giard 1990, b6). Semiotic theory focuses on “product appearance” (Oehlke 1990). Here the appearance of a product refers not only to the gestalt and all the perceptible properties and elements of the product, but also to the “product concept” with reference to the idea, experience and values of the product (Oehlke 1990, e4). Product semantics looks at design as a kind of language, a form of communication, and this communication is largely based on aesthetic qualities. Buchanan (1989) talks about design as communication, but his argumentation has a rhetoric perspective. The designers communicate with their intended audience through objects. Buchanan divides design rhetoric into three elements that to some degree are all included in every design argument: logos, ethos and pathos. Buchanan’s classification of design rhetoric is based on traditional rhetorical terminology. He calls logos technological reasoning, reasoning about composition, construction and material aimed at a user, and also reasoning based on the attitudes and values of potential users and the physical conditions of actual use. Ethos is the character of the design. The character can be connected to the designer or trademark, but also to traditional or contemporary style, etc. Buchanan calls the third element, pathos, emotion. It emanates from physical contact with objects or from active contemplation of objects before, during and after use. Buchanan says that pathos emotionally connects the object to the mind and is therefore a powerful and persuasive element of design rhetoric.

Aesthetic judgements are based on impressions given by our senses and filtered through our experience. In the current article, the intention is to focus on aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgements of objects such as printed textile patterns.

Categorical perception and aesthetic appreciation

The elementary perceptual principles mean that reality, as we perceive it, is divided up into distinct units. A technical term for this is categorical perception (Gärdenfors 2000, p.40; Harnad 1987; Klarén 2006, p.289). Spatial perception, basic perception of outlines, distinctive colour combinations, shape, balance, etc., are all based on categorical perception. Categorical perception is innate in some respects, but for the most part it is acquired early in life when the child starts to sort visual and other sensory impressions from the surrounding world.

In public discussions on the influence of taste and on teaching taste, however, more stable (categorical) perception and dynamic (e.g., cultural, emotional) perception are

¹ The process of design includes many intentions and a great deal of planning prior to production (Wiberg 1996), but in the present context, the concept of design is used in the simple sense of *giving form*: making decisions about size, shape, arrangement, material, fabrication technique, colour and finish that establish how an object is to be made (Buchanan 1989, p.109, Landqvist 1994; Lawson 2001).

often treated as though they were in opposition to each other. In this article, it is argued that there is no contradiction; the two principles of perception are complementary. We can touch, feel, look at and use objects. We make spontaneous judgements based on our knowledge, experiences and demands. Judgements of this kind are connected to intuitive experience, which is an instant sense of truth, fact etc., irrespective of any rational reasoning (Gärdenfors 2005). Gärdenfors claims that intuitive experience is built on implicit knowledge.² However, because it is cognitive, based on experience but difficult to express explicitly, he says that it is possible to explicitly explain parts of our intuitive experience afterwards by reflection, even if he also questions whether this is always the right answer. If implicit knowledge is cognitive, this explains how a well-educated and experienced specialist can have a "trained eye": "specialists combine information into larger meaningful structures, they are able to exclude irrelevant information and they rely on larger sets of mental models" (Gärdenfors 2005, p.80, my translation). The specialist therefore easily finds, rapidly combines and filters information so that intuitive "truth" appears without him/her having to pay any attention to the underlying process. Klarén (2006) remarks that experience in different fields of activity develop structures of attention that result in conscious or unconscious attention towards special aspects of a phenomenon. Structures of attention concern all kinds of sensuous experience and all experiences in life. Arnheim (1974, p.48-51) points out, however, that there must be a structure in the outer world that can be attended to and connected with experience. It is not possible to see a pattern if there is no structure in the outer world that evokes such a pattern.

The emotional perspective is sometimes an intrinsic part of design work (Buchanan 1989; Desmet 2003; Farstad 2003, p.71 ff; Wong 2003, p.13). Designers often present their new collections on mood boards, which mediate the emotional expression of their ideas (Eckert et al. 2000, p.529). Emotional responses can inspire customers to select a special product, and more and more producers are encouraging designers to manipulate the emotional impact of their design (Desmet 2003).

Taste and culture

In the contemporary public discussion, the well-known 20th century phenomenon of Swedish Grace – with its characteristic features of simplicity, strictness, order and clarity – has been said to be the result of conscious indoctrination intended to reduce the taste of the Swedish nation to a uniform level; everything Swedish was to be made with the same good taste and the clean, functional line and light colour design was to become "the right way" (Ahl & Olsson 2001; Rampell 2003). Bourdieu (1984) claims that this kind of indoctrination, or influence, is conceivable. He describes the structure of society as "fields" in which a struggle for power moves individuals ahead. Knowledge and understanding of the rules are distributed to the individual through a given context of economical, cultural and social frames – the individual's cultural capital. It is necessary to know the rules, or at least to have intuitive knowledge, a feeling for them. Individuals learn and feel what is proper, correct and right; what Bourdieu calls habitus. Bourdieu (1984) states that it is difficult to change the (power) position given on the social and cultural playground, and claims that aesthetics influences the individual's feeling of social and cultural belonging; thus, taste is dependent on social class and

² Implicit knowledge is what Polanyi (1966) calls tacit knowledge.

education. Hence, different kinds of education give rise to different kinds of taste and feelings of belonging, and this, in turn, influences choice of friends and social intercourse. In this case, aesthetics is not related to categorical perception; it is not about basic perceptual categorization based on harmony, balance etc., but about form associated with social context and events.

How we perceive the outside world depends on basic perceptual principles, subjective experiences and cultural context. There are different opinions, as seen above, as to whether preferences for simple design depend on perceptive principals or are due to more or less controlled, cultural influences. One problem in the public discussion on “good form” and good design is the use of vague and shifting definitions of the notion aesthetic value. Another is confusion over the two different kinds of formal qualities: the elementary formal qualities that are dependent on basic perception and the qualities of form experience, the meaning of which arises in interaction with the surrounding world and culture. It is therefore interesting to study how people judge textile patterns. What are their reasons for choosing one pattern instead of another?

Aim

The aim has been to study judgements, notions and values in relation to designed textile patterns as expressed by schoolchildren, consumers, teachers of textile handicraft and designers.

Method and material

Seven textile patterns labelled A, B, C, D, E, F and G were presented to the subjects. The patterns were stripes printed with blue colour (NCS: 3065-R90B) on white cotton fabric. The choice of printing blue stripes should cause subjects to focus on the patterns and reduce the influence of colour preference on pattern judgement. Many experiments on colour preference have been conducted during the past century, and although most researchers have pointed out that the experiments differ in many ways, many results show a preference for the colour blue all over the world (Ball 1965; Eysenck 1941; Jacobsson 1990; Pastoureau 2001; Sivik 1989). The patterns were all stripes, systematically designed and developed to result in patterns of different complexity (figure 1).

The choice of using striped patterns in the research was made to avoid figurative and naturalistic patterns that could influence preferences. The research focused on characteristics of patterns, thus the sensory or sensuous qualities of texture in the fabrics were not included in the study.

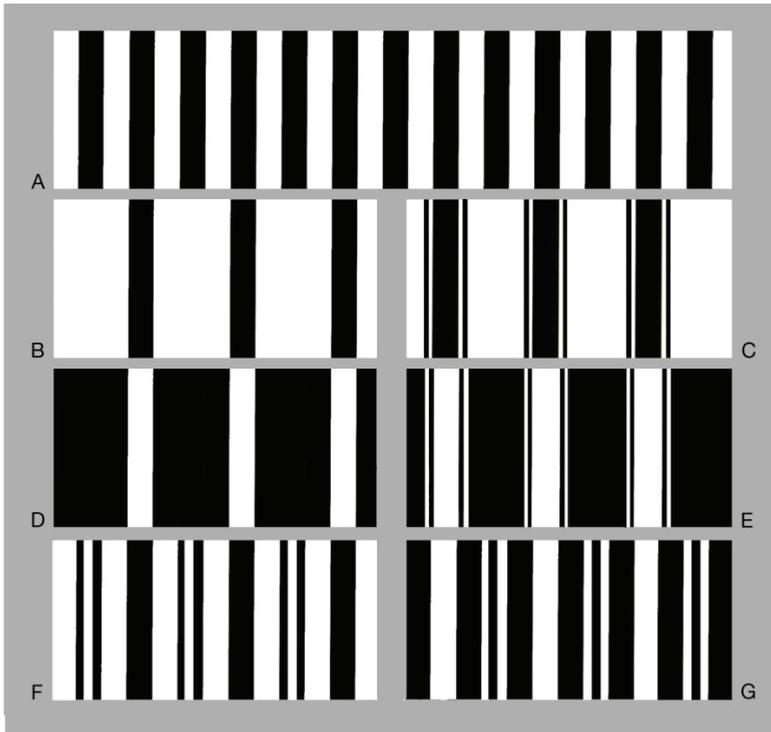


FIGURE 1. PATTERNS PRINTED ON CANVAS. ALL PATTERNS ARE DEVELOPED FROM PATTERN A, WHICH IS COMPOSED OF 10-MM-WIDE STRIPES IN BLUE AND WHITE.

Repertory Grid Method

A modified version of the Repertory Grid Method (Kelly 1955; Shaw & McKnight 1992) was used to study judgements, notions and values in relation to textile patterns and to analyse reasons for choices. The subjects were shown seven different textiles patterns, three at a time (triads). For each triad, the subjects were asked to choose one of the textile patterns, to reject another one and give reasons for their choices. No patterns were to be shown together more than once. Thus, each pattern was presented three times, but in different triad constellations. The subject's criteria of selection may be the same for all of the triads or different for different triads. When the subjects are asked to compare, they are helped to describe and justify chosen and rejected alternatives. The third alternative might be commented on for the purpose of comparing, but this was not required of the subject. Because the alternatives are repeated in a number of triads, all alternatives will normally be commented on.

Subjects

The subjects were from four different categories; Designers (n=10), teachers of textile handicrafts (n=15), Consumers (n=13) and Children (n=32), altogether 70 individuals. The ambition was to have a balanced mix of females and males and of individuals of all ages. However, in the category of teachers of textile handicrafts, this ambition was difficult to achieve, as this profession is female dominated. Thus, one

male was interviewed. The designer category consisted of educated and established designers with different specialities. Teachers and designers had higher education in colour and form and experience in designing different kinds of textile products.

The children were divided into two categories: Children age 15 years (n=12) and Children age 7- 12 (n=20). For the consumer group, the ambition was to find subjects with a capacity for verbal expression, and with an interest in textiles, but without a textile education. The subjects in this group were selected using snowball sampling, which means that during the interview period, names of other possible subjects to contact (Silverman 2000, p.159) were collected. Hence in the consumer and children groups, subjects had no professional education in design or textile, but varying experiences as consumers of textiles.

Interviews in the Repertory Grid Method

The printed fabrics were cut into 40x60 cm pieces and fastened onto neutral grey cardboards with pins in three corners of the fabrics. This allowed subjects who wanted to assess the fabric's quality to do so in the unpinned corner. The grey cardboard framed the fabric 40 mm all around. The triads were presented in different rooms to different subject groups, on tables or floors, a little aslant on the same white ground and white background and with the same lamp directed at the triads. In order to give all subjects the same impression of colour, a halogen lamp with a white spectral light was used. The subject sat or stood in front of the triad at a distance of about 1.5 metres. The interviews were tape-recorded. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the computer programme Maxqda; a programme made for qualitative analyses of textual data. The subjects' descriptions and explanations were sorted and organized into different categories during this analysis.

Result

The subjects were asked to choose one of the textiles, to reject another one and to justify their choices. Some of the 70 subjects (45) had favourites among the striped patterns and always chose that pattern when it appeared in a triad. Others (50) had anti-favourites that were always rejected when displayed.

An analysis of the subjects' reasons for their choices and rejections, i.e. the judgements and notions they experienced when looking at the designed printed patterns, was made by coding the material to form categories (Silverman 2000). Four justification categories could be observed: (1) Formal content: Colour and pattern composition, including simple or complex expressions (2) Functional content: ideas related to products (3) Cultural content: Cultural and social associations and (4) Emotional content: feelings and emotional associations (figure 2).

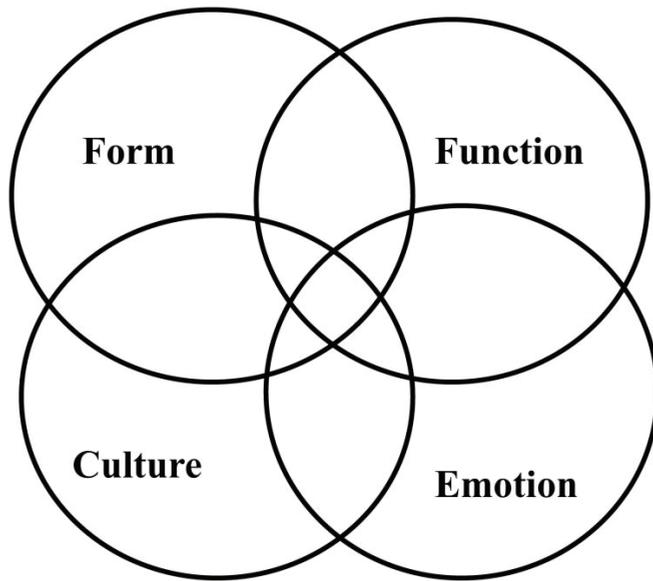


FIGURE 2. SUBJECTS MADE THEIR JUDGEMENTS OF THE TEXTILE PATTERNS BASED ON FORMAL, FUNCTIONAL, CULTURAL AND EMOTIONAL CONTENT. (MODEL BY SIRI HOMLONG)

Formal content

The colour design resulted in relatively great light contrast between the stripes. The choice of colour also meant that colour preferences could influence the choices. Those who liked blue very much preferred the bluest variation of the patterns or the bluest pattern. Others found the pattern too dark when the blue colour was dominant, and expressed the impression of the fabric as heavier or thicker due to the colour. One subject rejected pattern A, saying that she found it messy and dull. She added that “It has a lot to do with the colours: If it was black and white I may have made another choice” (consumer). Many of the subjects in the designer group had considerable experience of textile pattern design in industrial production. Most of the designers, in some triads, related their choices to the market value of the fabrics. One of the designers stated that “/.../the Swedish people love blue. If you want to be commercial you have to use blue”. Some subjects in the designer and teacher group presented ideas about how one could develop some of the patterns, but they had nothing against choosing a pattern even if they would have given it a better design. Talking generally about pattern when rejecting pattern A, one female designer meant that there had to be something more in a stripe than just two colours and stripes of the same width. One designer preferred pattern G to the reversed coloured pattern F: “(F) feels a bit boring. It feels too Gustavian, I think. The other one is a little...a little more unexpected. G is a little more unexpected”. One consumer also said that she had this distinction in mind when she made her choices: “...the first you think of is that it should be something you like, then you have to think of something else that is a bit conspicuous”. This consumer seemed to first make an intuitive choice, then corrected herself by looking for “something special” in the design.

Simplicity, also described as clean or pure, was something that many adults regarded as preferable. Among the younger children (age 7-12), however, many preferred more complex patterns and found the simplest patterns boring, but even adults could find the simplest patterns relatively uninteresting.

The more complex patterns (F and G) were chosen by fewest informants and were also most often rejected. However, no children age 7-12 are found among the 27 subjects who always rejected these patterns.

Functional content

Many subjects, even the younger children, had ideas about objects the patterned fabrics could be used for: clothes, interiors such as pillows, curtains, beddings and also wall hangings. Some subjects always had this in mind when they made their choices, but the professionals reflected more than the others on the function of the material or pattern in relation to proposed objects:

If there is as much printed on the fabric as there is on D, I really don't think it would be so comfortable to sleep on. But a tablecloth or some kind of home furnishing textile which you could...you don't have to have so much in direct contact with the skin and so, I could image....Yes, if I should try something really smashing maybe I could also use it to make a pair of trousers or something like that. And aprons too, and things like...Handbag, perhaps... (teacher).

Later on, the subject touched the fabric and found that it was usable as chair cover. Reflecting on function, one designer discussed the patterns as combined with other objects:

And if you imagine (it) in this field of application (as a) curtain, or if you imagine (it) as tablecloth – Now you are going to lay a table and then ...the tablecloth (she sighs) has to be nice, but still it has to be kept in the background of the plates, then I think that C is preferable, seeing that F then feels too conspicuous (designer).

The reason for this result is probably that professionals are more used to making these kinds of considerations. They may also have focused on the patterns as such as suitable patterns for objects, independent of textile material or technique. Another designer discussed during the whole interview how the patterns he had chosen would complement each other in a collection. With regard to possible functions of the fabrics in practical life, many of the designers and teachers also presented ideas for improving the patterns, the colour design and the textile materials of the fabrics. Their implicit knowledge influenced their judgements, but they also knew how to improve the pattern or fabric quality for better usability. In this case, the displayed pattern was viewed as a design proposal.

The younger children (age 7-12) more often used function as a reason for their judgements.

Cultural content and Emotional content

Choices made based on culture and emotions were often integrated and difficult to separate, both in the analysis and in subjects' reflections. Therefore, these two disparate phenomena will be integrated. Cultural associations were related to traditional styles and special objects such as the Finish flag, awnings and traditional bolsters. General associations also occurred such as summertime, marine style, the Swedish west coast, Greece and café. As mentioned above, reasons for judgements

were often integrated, deriving from more than one category, as in some of the following examples: One consumer always preferred pattern C because of its simplicity, and it gave him “really (a) summer feeling”. Many adults associated patterns F and G with domestic handicrafts: “I choose that one, I don’t know why, I get a sort of handicraft feeling from those (with) different (stripes) - that when the stripes are different widths - but that’s how I feel” (consumer). Associations with well-known trademarks such as IKEA, Polarn&Pyret, Gudrun Sjödén, Marimekko, etc. also occurred, mainly in the adults’ remarks.

Subjects made associations to different products, personal memories or were influenced by the direct context of the patterns when looking at the triad. Their associations could be negative or positive. One teacher reported that as a child she had wallpaper in her bedroom similar to pattern B/D. She could not neglect her negative associations to the pattern and always rejected it when displayed. One boy (age 10) chose pattern A because he had a similar fabric on a sofa at home. These reasons are examples of individual cultural and emotional experiences that influenced the judgments. Sometimes subjects who had made the same choice appeared to have completely different justifications for their choices. Their reasons were dependent on different cultural or artistic focal points and disparate individual experiences. This was probably the case for two distinguished designers: one of them found that pattern D was connected to “Swedish cultural heritage”, the other regarded D (and pattern A) as “ageless and /--/ not at figurative, so to speak”. One of the youngest children made the same association to ski tracks as did one of the oldest designers as well as a female consumer, but with different patterns and with different reactions: The girl chose pattern B because “it looks like...ski tracks.../.../. I like skiing very much” (age 9). The designer rejected pattern F and said that even if she like skiing very much, she thought the pattern looked too much like ski tracks. The female consumer rejected pattern G because it remained her that she should go out skiing, and obviously this was nothing she was looking forward to.

Many subjects, even the younger children, seemed to be conscious of their own taste. In both the children and adult groups, subjects justified their choices by saying that the pattern was/was not to their taste, or they described their overall taste during the interview session. Most of the designers also referred to their personal taste when explaining their choices, but it is obvious that skill and professional experience influence judgements.

Conclusion

Categorical perception gives a basic structure and order to the outer world (Gärdenfors 2000; Harnard 1987; Klarén 2006). In interaction with the surrounding world, the individual acquires dynamic, coherent and significant patterns of perceptive experiences, some of them more important to the individual than others. Direct experience of the logic of the outer world contributes to development of structures of attention. Such adapted principles of perception – conscious or unconscious – cause us to attend to special aspects of the world. They are the basis of implicit knowledge and serve the same purpose for perception that a theoretical perspective does for scientific research. When the subjects in this study made judgements about the textile patterns, they did so using different structures of attention, based on individual implicit knowledge. They could even use different structures of attention during the same interview session. Some subjects’ attention was directed towards the function of the

patterns: What could this pattern be used for? Others directed their attention towards form content, cultural content or emotional content, but judgements were often based on more than one of these categories. In the adult groups, curiosity quite often led to an analysis of the pattern. That this occurred in the professional groups is not remarkable. They are used to analysing the effect of composition of form elements. Consumers too wanted to find out how the form elements influenced their judgements – especially when changing the context (triad) in which a previously chosen/rejected pattern was displayed changed their judgement.

The design of the striped textile fabrics aroused different structures of attention. The subjects were asked to compare different patterns in each triad, and reasons for judgements based on form content were often connected to their own taste: they liked the bluer patterns, the simple/complex patterns, etc. All the striped patterns had a systematic and logical structure – a kind of distinct order that, according to Langer (1953) and Gombrich (1979), makes patterns easy to perceive. Many subjects, however, found that especially pattern A flickered. Pattern A was disturbing to perception and often rejected. Some of the designers knew from experience – from implicit knowledge – how they could avoid that kind of flickering in a pattern design, and could therefore be more positive to the pattern as such. One interesting observation was that the older children, already at the age of 15, judged the complex patterns more negatively than the younger children did and more like the adults did.

Some of the subjects always attended to the functions of the patterned fabrics. They found them usable for clothes, interior design, etc., and they sometimes had ideas about how they could use combinations of patterns towards these purposes. Some of the designers focused on how the patterns could be combined in a collection or on how colour choice could make the fabrics more marketable. The designers' remarks above are clearly connected to knowledge of habitus (Bourdieu 1984). The extent to which the other subjects' proposals were connected to habitus is not explicitly expressed in the interviews.

In the subjects' judgements based on cultural content, implicit knowledge was a clear factor of recognition of semiotic signs in the designed patterns. In the child groups, the semiotic content – “product appearance” (Oehlke 1990) – was not observed or understood. Obviously they did not have the kind of perceptual experience needed to notice the semiotic dimension of “appearance”; they lacked the structures of attention needed to recognize this dimension. At least they had no verbal notions to describe it. Giard (1990) claims that designers are more visually literate. In the current study, the designers were adaptors, not designers, and as “readers” of the design, they understood the semiotic signs. Most adult subjects understood these signs, however, although they were not professionals. With the exception of some of the 15-year-olds, the children did not connect the patterns to a specific design or cultural heritage.

Buchanan (1989) classifies communication into three rhetorical categories: logos, ethos and pathos which are all found in this study. As Buchanan claims, pathos (category of emotion) seemed to be a strong rhetorical element. It is notable that the designers let their good memories of objects from childhood guide their choice of patterns, teachers were guided by very negative emotions towards some patterns, and three subjects at different ages and from different groups formed emotional associations with skiing when judging the patterns.

The judgements were based on implicit knowledge of different kinds: direct experience of physical and practical conditions, “know-how”, cultural and emotional experiences. Some designers wanted the designed printed patterns to be “something

special”, and they knew from their education and professional experience how to make a pattern more conspicuous. The designers demonstrated their explicit or implicit knowledge of the conditions that must be included in habitus (Bourdieu 1984). Experience and awareness of habitus is part of the designer’s profession. A statement by one female consumer indicated implicit knowledge concerning her own habitus: for some reason not trusting her first impression, she checked to see whether there was “something a bit conspicuous” in the pattern that allowed her to choose it. One female designer also made clear that her choice in some triads would be different if she made the choice as a professional or as a private person. One teacher was very surprised when she found that she loved a pattern which was not what she would describe as her “normal taste”. These examples may illustrate the – more or less conscious – influence of habitus, the common rules of taste.

When individuals have different aims and experiences, they perceive the world differently. One person may ignore what another pays attention to. Awareness of aesthetic qualities is developed through experiences in life, and can therefore even be learned. The reasons why a pattern can be looked upon in different ways are manifold. Sensuous preferences are dependant on a number of mental dimensions. The dominant inner contexts of individuals, basic perceptual patterns of apprehension, direct experiences of the surrounding world, and influences from cultural context all give different and complex structures of attention. Different structures of attention lead to different perceptual choices and different judgements, notions and values concerning, for example, a designed printed pattern. The present study shows that subjects make their judgements on the basis of formal, functional, cultural and emotional contents. These aspects should therefore be in focus in design work and design education.

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