

Aleks Dawson

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DHWANI GARG

The first question is also the most obvious: Can you tell me about your background?

ALEKS DAWSON

I was born in Australia and spent a significant portion of my childhood in Papua New Guinea. My mother is Serbian and I have dual Australian and Serbian citizenship. I have been in the US almost 13 years. I am currently designing at Tommy Hilfiger and also teach branding and typography at Parsons, and previously taught at RISD and Northeastern.

DG

What drew you to the field of ornament design? Was there a particular moment or experience that sparked your interest?

AD

Excerpt from Aleks Dawson Re: Ornament Thesis Introduction:
“I’ve always been attracted to ornament. One very early memory is that of the clanky century-old upright piano we had when I was a kid,[...]. I adored this piano: not just for its Cajun honky-tonk sound but for the inlaid brass work it bore on its front. The brass inlay had fin de siècle, William Morris-esque flourishes, and while I knew it referenced nature, these were plants I had never seen—whimsical and strange, yet somehow deeply familiar. They were fascinating to me, and I loved to sit at that piano and touch that brass inlay, wondering how it got there and who had made it; wondering why every other piano I had seen was so plain in comparison; and always thinking we were lucky, in a way, to have such extravagance in our home.

In Papua New Guinea I saw ornament and pattern I had never seen before. I marveled at everything from bilum bags to mud masks, head dresses, piercings, body painting and basket weaving; right through to the ritual scarification that even some in my school had on their bodies. These patterns were so totally foreign to me and yet somehow deeply familiar[...]. This experience—coupled with my parents showing us Europe at a young age— had a significant bearing on my interest in ornament, pattern and design. Such widespread exposure to so much visual stuff—and from so many divergent places— greatly impacted my perception of the world and its seemingly universal love of the ornate.

[...]. Wherever we go, I habitually seek out examples of local ornament, always looking at the “vernacular,” and always questioning what these visual languages mean, where they came from, and what their future is in the broader context of an increasingly homogenized global visual aesthetic. As I have grown, I have come to believe that ornament exists far beyond appliqué. Ornament is so much more than “just wallpaper,” which in my experience has been a consistent critique leveled at it by its detractors, including some here at RISD. I believe this antipathy toward ornament and pattern stems from the lasting influence of the likes of Owen Jones and Adolf Loos, who in his 1910 lecture *Ornament and Crime* equated ornament to the Papuan’s savage “urge to draw on one’s face and everything within reach.” Modernists following Loos took his ideas further: from Le Corbusier arguing that a house should be a “machine for living” to Mies van der Rohe advocating “less is more.” The idea that ornament was somehow outmoded or simply not “modern” coincided with unparalleled industrialization and mechanization in our world. [...]. If modernism stood for cleanliness, clarity and rationalism, ornament represented the antithesis. Ornament was materially and aesthetically demoted, and it has languished on the peripheries of our collective visual vocabulary ever since. And while ornament appears to have resurfaced in various kitsch and revivalist trends, it has not held the same aesthetic legitimacy it had prior to Modernism’s damning indictment.”¹

DG I had the opportunity to read your thesis, and I was amazed by your work. However, I was particularly drawn to the project Pattern Box (Fig. I). I would like to know what tool you used to create those patterns and if you could walk me through the process.

AD In the Fall of 2018, Bethany Johns and Paul Soulellis took the Graduate Studio II class to the Providence Public Library’s Updike Special Collections. We were shown dozens of rare books and manuscripts and essentially tasked with choosing one as the basis of our formal investigations for the remainder of the semester. I was immediately drawn to Owen Jones’ 1856 *Grammar of Ornament*, a truly

monumental work of publishing that achieved never-before-seen standards in chromolithographic color printing. I had seen reprints of the book before—I even own a Dorling Kindersley reproduction—but to see the colossal original folio edition in the flesh was nothing short of revelatory. Over the proceeding weeks I continued to iterate work based on Jones’ magnum opus, and twice made appointments with the Updike curators to see the book in person. I eventually produced the below set of sixty 17×14 inch lasercut patterns on bristol board based on Jones’ original plates, with the size and heft to match that of his original edition. This work was the genesis of this thesis, and I must thank Bethany and Paul for introducing me to Jones and encouraging me to push further with this investigation and celebration of ornament.

I made the 18×15” box with stained birch veneer ply at RISD’s Co-Works. I lasercut sixty 17×14” bristol board sheets at RISD’s Co-Works. I used to be a graduate instructor here, so ran teams of graduate and undergraduate students who worked here—we taught many different making skills.



FIG. I: Pattern Box

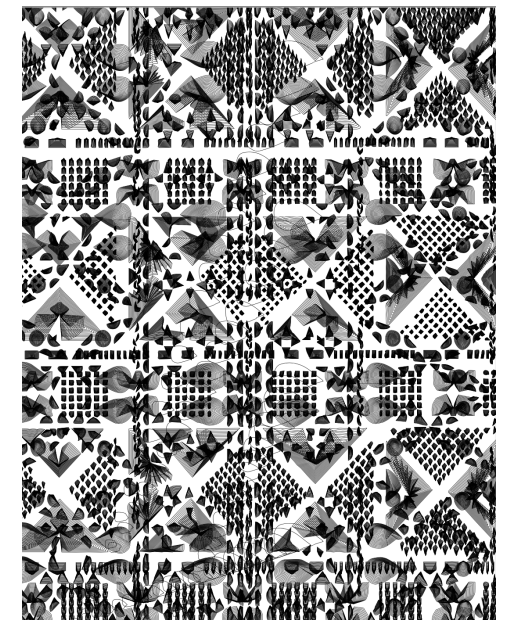


FIG. II: Remixing Owen Jones

¹ Dawson, Aleks. *Re:Ornament*, <https://thesis.aleksdawson.com/>.

DG A lot of your projects often have a backstory, such as your work Remixing Owen Jones (Fig. II) or Tabula Combinatoria (Fig. III). What motivates you to incorporate these narratives into your designs?

AD Design does not exist in a vacuum—there is nothing new under the sun. Everything comes from somewhere. I am interested in figuring out the provenance, meaning and history of something before I can “connect” to it—especially when interrogating symbology; or typographic “flavor”. For example, right now I am working on an identity for something in Mexico. I have been looking at talavera mexicana, papel picado, Huichol beading, serape textiles etc for inspiration but also to understand what would genuinely feel “connected” to the place and to the people. How can you hope to design for someone when you don’t know who they are? Narrative can and should be everything. Sadly in a lot of commercial work these days (including my own) there is very little consideration of context or provenance.

DG (A follow-up question) Can you talk about the process and how you accomplished what you aimed for?

AD I lasercut a bunch of paper based on designs traced from Owen Jones’ famous book. Das it!

DG How do you balance aesthetic appeal with practical considerations in pattern designs?



FIG. III: Tabula Combinatoria, research website

AD What do you mean by practical considerations? Scale? Repetition? Reflection? Figure ground relationship (balance and counterbalance)? All of these are “practical” but influence the aesthetic appeal.

DG I am very curious as you are currently working at Tommy Hilfiger, do you use ornamentation or pattern design in any capacity? (Please feel free to answer if you are comfortable)

AD In my current role not so much. Tommy is part of a large parent company, PVH, which also owns Calvin Klein. It is important to understand that such a large company has many many layers of thinking and consideration season-by-season in its product; but equally layered and considered approach to how it markets this product in a way that is true to the DNA of its brand. I am on the marketing end of this equation: a lot of what we produce considers global and regional corporate strategy; a lot of it follows mandated graphic, typographic and photographic guidelines. There are times where what I produce has more latitude in terms of what I can explore in my making. But these are usually special projects and internal one-offs. My day-to-day is spent producing much of the wholesale (in-store signage & online); paid media (digital, social media and in-print or environmental marketing) and some e-commerce stuff. I don’t deal at all with any typographic or ornamental design in the product itself. My hope is one day I might be able to play in this area as well—it would be so fun to make some patterns for clothing!

DG What is the interesting part of your job profile?

AD The fast pace. I produce a lot of assets every day. Sometimes hundreds, in both small and large (billboard)-scale print and digital. It is fashion so it is seasonally-driven, the turnaround on work is QUICK and there is ALWAYS new work to make, which is a very fortunate position to be in. I also work with a diverse and interesting group of people; and for a progressive and large company. I have worked in much smaller and more “design-centric” studios (like Pentagram for example) and while that work is also great, and varied, there are some positives to working in-house in design.

DG Any memorable challenges you faced while working on a design project related to your work and how you faced those challenges?

AD There are always challenges. When you are in school, or you are in a more conceptually-challenging job in the marketplace, one repeat challenge is what the next idea will be. How to explore, how to revamp, how to refresh. I just read this quote here:

“As the novelist Andrew Holleran tells T, “Writing is basically unconscious, and you don’t get any smarter about it. Imagine a brain surgeon who didn’t learn from each operation? We’d be horrified. But when you sit down to write, you’re always wondering how to do it.””

When you are in a more production-centric job like I currently am, time management is a huge consideration and can often be challenging. Currently I work on different projects for four producers and two art directors, so there are always deadlines. Every day. I am not good with deadlines sometimes, especially when I need time to sit and think “creatively” about how I might approach an open brief.

DG If you had to pick right now, what would you say is your favorite project or the one that really pushed you out of your comfort zone?

AD I adore making my mandelbulbs. “Back to Nature” (Fig. IV) in the last chapter of my thesis. I would like to return to that kind of making (even if just for myself) more intensely in the future.

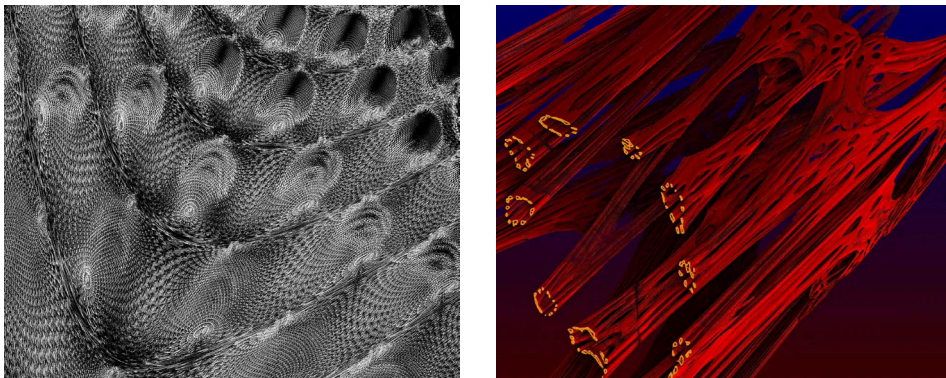


FIG. IV: Back to Nature

DG What influences you more, contemporary trends or historical preferences of your own?

AD All history was once contemporary. So, history interests me more. Especially because contemporaneity can get confused with quality. Just because it is “now” doesn’t mean it is “good”. When Iris Apfel died I read a quote of hers:

“Being stylish and being fashionable are two entirely different things,” she said in one TikTok video. “You can easily buy your way into being fashionable. Style, I think is in your DNA. It implies originality and courage.”

To me, style is an understanding of history. Fashion is a fixation on contemporaneity.

DG Do you prefer to use or experiment with culturally different and diverse practices? Why? How?

AD Of course I do, but I am always cognizant of the provenance and of my potential uneducated or unwelcome appropriation of other peoples’ “stuff”. In the thesis introduction, where I talk about my own cultural influences and experience from Australia, Serbia, Papua New Guinea. Those places, people, culture and visual history/ making I feel I have enough of a connection to and history with that I have no qualms drawing from them in my own work. Other places require more sensitivity. For example, a poster I made for a Filipina designer I looked at the hand-lettering on Jeepneys (Fig. V). I was well-versed in the vernacular “look” as my parents lived in Manila for many years, and I saw it first-hand. BUT, I still wanted to be aware that it was a form of appropriation and I credited the designers whose typography I was essentially lifting for my own desired “flavor”.

DG How do you know when a pattern and ornament is complete?

AD I heard Matthew Carter once say “a typeface is never finished; it is merely abandoned”. Same too with ornament. That is what makes it so enticing. Here is a quote I wrote myself on this very experience:

“In my exploration, I have found that ornament begets more ornament, just as infinity folds, splits and doubles from the cell to the cosmos. This is a dangerous thing for a decorator crab such as myself, in that I imagine it is much like traveling our universe at warp speed: everything is everything, and I can’t get enough of it.”



FIG. V: Poster for Filipino designer Clara Balaguer

DG What have you been interested in lately? Any interesting topics that have caught your attention?

AD I am interested in the longevity of visual making. I divorced social media in 2016 when Zuckerberg broke America. I was noticing I was designing for those platforms, and thinking about design within those platforms. I was worried about who I should make something for and who then would like it and so on. What I found was a visual echo chamber: everyone was making the same kinda stuff. And everyone was pinging it to eachother in the same vacuum. I love

looking elsewhere at stuff that feels “untapped” or uncelebrated. The longevity of utility in design is something I really love right now. I love taking pics especially of trucks, or city codes, signage, strange purely-functional demarcations. Lots of them are apparently meaningless, messageless—at least to the general populace. But they were still typeset by someone. The design was approved and paid for by others. The vinyl was then cut by someone else, and installed by yet another person. Like, what is this chain of organization and command that led to sometimes beautifully clunky work? Why is it there? How did it come to be? And is it visually tasty because it has utility or is it exciting to me because I am a conceited, jaded designer self-fornicating over objectively “bad” design? I dunno, but I like that I am attracted to this stuff. It’s far more interesting than “designed” design to me these days.

DG Do you have any advice for someone like me who's using type as a tool to create patterns and hopes to eventually submit my designs for linens, like household fabrics?

AD Yes. Divorce yourself from the meaning of the glyph. Look only at the shape. The counterbalance. The continuance. The opportunity inherent in the shape to tessellate. Then, if there is still textual meaning to the glyph when set in pattern, then that’s a bonus or maybe just an additional reading. I really love what you’re starting to do in your “?” patterns. The orange (page 169, question quilt, 28) one speaks to me most as it is starting to work with pure form, and the glyph is no longer really legible, at least at first. Go this route.

And then think about the scale relative to the application: something on a couch or a curtain needs to consider the size of that thing or it will become textural; it will be lost. Don’t be afraid to be bold and big. Ornate doesn’t always have to mean dainty.

My second piece of advice is make as many as you can. Get so fluid with making them you are no longer precious about your offspring. Go from making a few children to spawning hordes. This will help you, as you’ll start to see what’s really good versus just OK. And you won’t care about tossing half of them aside. And feel free to hit me up if you ever want to talk about a pattern, I’m always willing. <3