

# Un-Mastering the Pattern

What does it mean to master pattern cutting?  
And, what might it mean to un-master patterns?

In fashion design, much emphasis is placed on getting the pattern 'correct' and to do this successfully a designer must master the skill of pattern cutting. In many ways this makes sense, the most notable fashion designers are all skilled in pattern cutting from Balenciaga<sup>1</sup> and Yohji Yamamoto<sup>2</sup> to Alexander McQueen<sup>3</sup>. Think of phrases commonly used to describe these fashion designers such as *master craftsman*, *master tailor*, *master of cloth*. But mastery is also coded as masculine and historically is linked to traits culturally labelled as masculine such as control, dominance and authority.

Skills associated with men are often framed as things to master; skills associated with women are, in contrast, designated less value. Mastery is an ideal that rewards command and domination.

The tool most commonly used in fashion to draft patterns manually is called the PatternMaster<sup>4</sup>, helping the novice to master the making part of the fashion process and bring the 2D sketch to life. But, what does the act to 'master' anything mean in practice? Why is mastering so valued? Whose pattern knowledges are designers mastering and what pattern knowledges are designers not mastering? Is it time to un-master the pattern?

What exactly is the PatternMaster? Described as an all-in-one drafting ruler, a PatternMaster is typically made from clear perspex with multiple curve templates (for armholes, necklines, etc.), metric ruler measurement guides, seam-allowance guides, and angle markings (45° and 90°); it therefore provides a single tool, so pattern makers no longer require multiple separate rulers such as L-squares and French curves<sup>5</sup>. As a tool it can help to measure, draw, modify, and add details to sewing patterns more easily and accurately than with basic rulers<sup>6</sup> alone.

And yet, the PatternMaster is not an unbiased tool; while it has built-in curves for armholes, necklines, and hips, the fixed shapes cannot match every body type or design variation and the universal measurement guides are western imperial or metric numbering systems. Its design reflects western historical averages and traditional sizing, which implicitly reinforces gender binaries, body ableism and thin standard body norms in garment drafting. The tool is shaped around standard body measurements and therefore reproduces explicit forms of bias.

Did Dr. Martin Shoben consider body bias when he developed and designed the Pattern Master in London 1979 for the UK brand PatternMaster (Morplan)? Shoben's design was patented and marketed as the original all-in-one pattern-design tool, several copied versions are for sale globally, all helping to draft patterns in the same way with standard sizing. And, so the idea of 'mastering a skill' being seen as neutral is clearly a universal myth. The PatternMaster reflects a specific historical and western way of understanding knowledge and power. The process of mastery is not just about becoming competent at a skill; it is also about control, authority, and hierarchy—values shaped by patriarchal and colonial systems. Because of this, mastery tends to reward certain people and ways of knowing while marginalizing and excluding others.

These points are relevant to how fashion is made because the origins of mastery are rooted in a colonial process: a process that presents knowledge as something to be captured and contained. This mirrors colonial logic, where land, people, and cultures were - and continue to be - treated as things to be stolen, dispossessed, and managed for profit. Knowledge becomes commodified and something to extract and dominate rather than a set of practices that can be related to<sup>7</sup>. In this way, mastery most often centres western

European and Anglo-American standards by presenting them as universal; and, it is this standard that is seen as a benchmark and as 'neutral'.

Central to understanding the process of mastery therefore are its tools. Deconstructing the PatternMaster and other tools that legitimise dominant forms of fashion are essential for understanding fashion knowledge construction, as Black feminist lesbian author Audre Lorde, reminds us in the 1984 essay 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House'. She writes, 'For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.' Is this what the process of mastering the pattern means in fashion? How then will we un-master fashion?

In Black feminist science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler's first novel *Patternmaster*<sup>8</sup>, Butler uses the Patternmaster characters to ask whether a society built on control is morally justified? For Butler, the Patternmasters are an elite ruling class of a future society who exert control through an extensive psychic network called the Pattern. Building on themes of power and freedom, slavery and control, and hierarchy, eugenics, and inherited dominance, the novel presents a strictly hierarchical society. For Butler, Patternmasters can control other minds and enforce loyalty through psychic pressure or pain: can a comparison be made with fashion? Does the PatternMaster sizing mechanism control a series of hierarchical body standards?

To un-master the *PatternMaster* in fashion would represent a shift for designers saying "I have mastered this," to "I practice in and with relation to others". Mastery pretends that learning a skill is individual and disconnects skills from context. However, most skills are learned with help from others and shaped by those relationships, experience and the social environment. To un-master is therefore not about lowering standards or rejecting excellence; it's about denying skills that only conform to dominant (western) ways of knowing; and, refusing colonial standards of knowledge which erase where knowledge comes from. If we talk about fashion skill as an ongoing practice rather than something to 'master', we make more space for different and diverse approaches to drafting fashion patterns. For un-mastering is to embrace ways of knowing that are often labelled unscientific, primitive, basic or incomplete. Break your PatternMaster, shatter it into pieces and re-learn to un-master the pattern.

1 Balenciaga's pattern cutting skills are often characterised as 'virtuoso', such as the famous 'Tulip Dress', you can read more about these techniques here: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/secrets-of-balenciagas-construction>

2 See Yohji Yamamoto Design Download here for a free Yamamoto pattern and see his approach to pattern cutting: <https://www.showstudio.com/projects/design-download/yohji-yamamoto>

3 Read more about McQueen's skills in tailoring that he learnt in Saville Row, London: <https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/collections/london-stories/alexander-mcqueen-londons-fashion-groundbreaker/>

4 The PatternMaster designed by Dr. Martin Shoben is the commercial name given to the practical tool used in fashion to manually draft accurate patterns.

5 A French Curve is a template, usually made of plastic or wood, used in manual drafting in fashion to create curved lines.

6 Basic rulers, flat tools made from wood, plastic or metal in various lengths, are key tools in manual pattern cutting used to ensure measurements are accurate and to draw straight lines.

7 To learn more about how knowledge has been extracted through colonialism read Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London, Bloomsbury, 2022 [1999])

8 If you want to know more about the group of science fiction novels by Octavia E. Butler check the Patternist five book series (also known as the Patternmaster series or Seed to Harvest), Butler's first published novel, 1976's *Patternmaster*, was the first book in this series (London, Hachette, 2023 [1976])

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