

# Trends and traditions

## Negotiating different cultural models in relation to sustainable craft and artisan production

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If the identity of 'design' as a practice is contested then the relationship of design and designers to craft and craft practices can be hugely confused. This lack of clarity can encourage non-design based organisations to promote the use of 'trend forecasting' as a panacea to the design dilemma associated with craft production for non-traditional markets. Consequently fashion sensitive trends become perceived as the driving force of design-led consumption. In this context how do we understand what 'trend forecasting' is and *becomes* when used in this manner? How does it contribute or not to the sustainability of local design cultures?

This paper examines how these challenges have been interrogated and experienced through practice at Masters Level at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. It seeks sustainable strategies for design and craft drawing on a diverse range of examples to illustrate contemporary artefacts realised from a diverse range of projects, sources and geographical locations.

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## Introduction

The initial use of trend forecasts originates from the global centres of design promotion where cultural capital associated with craft practice is regularly adopted to add authenticity to rapidly moving consumer cycles. What issues does this raise for artisan and craft communities?

For craft communities referencing trend forecasting may appear a logical response to the risk of engaging with a design-led market. However, does this strategy put local innovation into a passive or subservient relationship to consumer-led value systems and inhibit the development of intellectual capital within host communities?

Is it not more sustainable to identify those areas of added value that are specific to the qualities and characteristics of particular craft traditions and communities, in order to create products that have a longer term place within a contemporary market context? How can a discourse between the various stakeholders from design, craft and artisan communities make a significant contribution to such issues? In this context we need to acknowledge that there are different types of trend forecasting and use of trend information within design processes. In this paper we discuss how different forms of market and context intelligence might be used within design projects that involve craft and artisan communities.

## **Why trend forecasting?**

Why is it relevant to talk about trend forecasting in relationship to the sustainability of craft and artisan production? Increasingly local and indigenous markets are affected by shifts in consumer attitudes and behaviours in response to globalisation and industrialization that threatens traditional craft practice. If crafts or artisan communities want to develop products that are relevant to contemporary commercial markets, local, indigenous or export, then they will be affected by consumer trends.

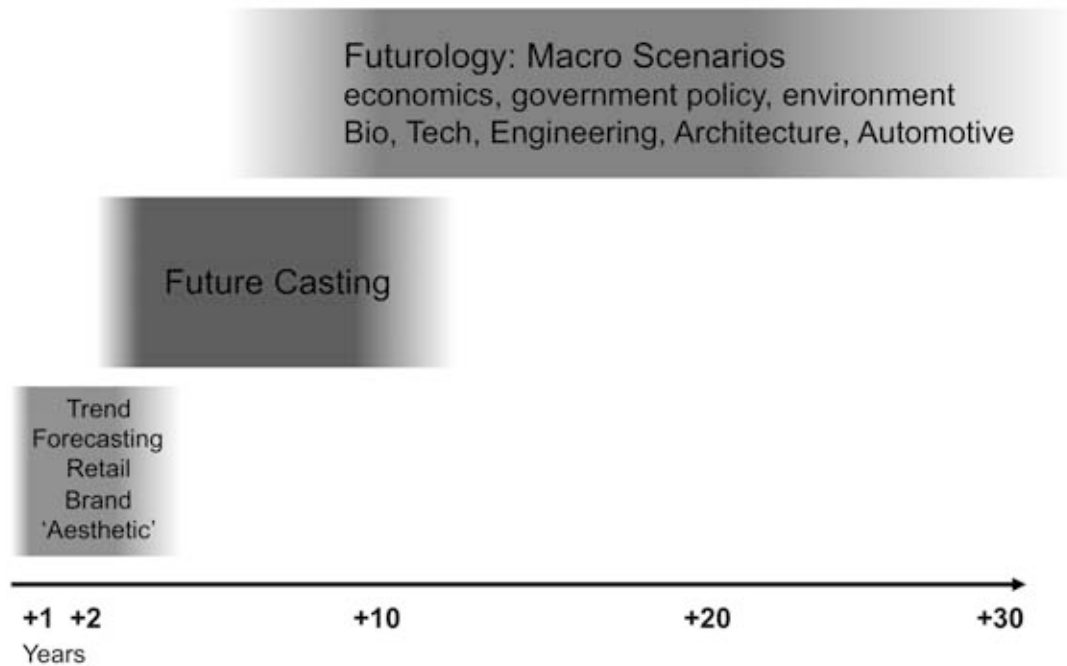
Trend forecasting contributes to the process where industrialised companies attempt to identify and interpret changes in consumer attitudes and behaviour in order to respond to their markets, to anticipate consumer desires and ‘needs’ and to reduce perceptions of commercial risk. However, this is not a simple task. There are different consumption systems and cycles within the industrialised context. If traditional crafts want to compete within the international market place and industrialised products, there can be a conflict between the different production and consumption cycles, for example, speed of production, scope for diversification, scalability etc. Each of these issues are driven by specific contextual assumptions. Not least that technological enablers have consequences within cultures familiar with and conditioned by concepts of obsolescence. These assumptions have implications for the sustainability of crafts consumption viewed within these expectations

## **What is ‘trend forecasting’?**

Historically ‘aesthetic’ trend forecasting originated in the fashion industry in the mid nineteenth century, with the first fashion trend consultancy opening in New York in 1927. Post Second World War future casting, the long-term macro economic and social planning process, was developed by the American military and later adapted by large business corporations. At the same time advertising agencies formally began to study consumer behaviour (Higham (2009) p.44-45).

During the 1960s, when the interest in newness and innovation was at the forefront of western social thinking, the word ‘trend’ moved from scientific usage into social commentary. ‘Trend’ has come to mean ‘a prevailing tendency, an inclination, of statistically detectable change or of current style or preference (Higham (2009) p 14-15).

Today there are at least three different types of contemporary trend approaches each with different time horizons. These are different lenses through which to consider the future, each with different focal lengths and focusing on different cycles and different aspects of society(ies), geography, etc. (figure 1).



**Figure 1: Time horizons of different types of forecasting**

Source: Graphics by ultra-indigo based on an interview with Tim Hoar (ultra-indigo (2010a))

Retail, brand and aesthetic trend forecasting are perhaps most familiarly understood to represent trend forecasting within the consumer context. The general assumption is that a trend forecast concerns the broadly based aesthetic information of, colour, texture, silhouette, form and mood or 'look' indicators for the next production cycle. This perception is now widely utilised across clothing, consumer products and interiors industries. Viewed against the diagram it can be appreciated what an extremely short time-scale trend forecasts cover in reality, perhaps as little as eighteen months.

In contrast to the short cycles of trend forecasting, future casting works with timelines from one year to perhaps ten years ahead. In the consumer context, future casting is less densely referenced than trend forecasting, is likely to use scenario techniques and to be part of a medium term commercial or governmental strategy. For example, driven by the need to source the requisite chemicals to manufacture dye colours, the textile industry practices the use of long term colour charts up to eight or nine years ahead. Macro scenarios, or what is sometimes termed Futurology or Futures Studies covers the longest-term view. Macro scenarios examine long-term cycles in economics, governmental policy, the environment, social statistical feedback, and technological innovations in order to look at possible, probable and preferable future scenarios.

These different types of forecasting become overlaid and influence each other. Taken together they provide a contextual awareness that fuels design practice. Trend forecasting, by its very nature, is not about predicting the future, but 'taking the pulse' and making an educated 'guess' based on a contextual awareness. Such sensitivity cannot be achieved by buying in a short term 'look book'.

## Why use trends?

With the absence of alternative models many non-design based organisations promote the use of 'trend forecasting' as a panacea to the design dilemma associated with craft production for non-traditional markets for craft artefacts. Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as the CBI Centre for the Promotion of Imports from Developing Countries, The Netherlands, provide market information, trend forecasting and business advice to craft and artisan based communities or companies who wish to enter western industrialised markets.

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Whilst in most cases this trend information is free or low cost, access to market information and trend forecasting allows craft and artisan communities or companies insight into potential new markets and contexts for their products. However, the use of this information can be problematic (figure 2).



**Figure 2: Time lags in trend forecasting**

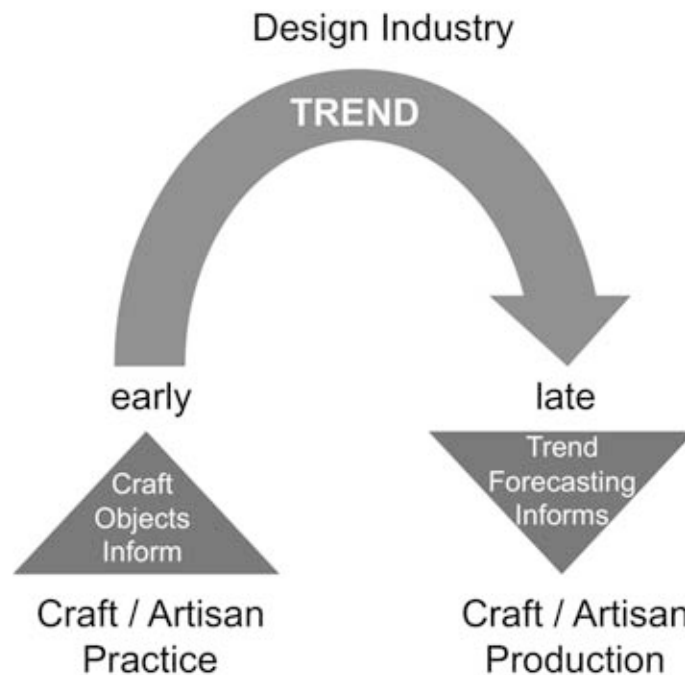
Sources: 'Our Metropolis', CBI Centre for the Promotion of Imports from Developing Countries, The Netherlands (2010). 'Alexander McQueen', Thestyleandbeautydoctor.com (2009). 'Burberry/Emma Watson', posh24.com (2009)

For example, this mood board from the CBI website defines a graphic trend in fashion for Autumn 2010. The illustrations include pictures of garments from leading fashion designers from autumn winter 2009 collections, which have been in the public domain as images since spring 2009. This time-frame means anyone referencing this trend forecast today, will at best begin product development in the middle to later stages of the trend.

Whilst the fashion industry with its notoriously short trend cycles, might be an extreme example, similar patterns of adoption can now be detected in other associated sectors. As fashion brands have diversified into home wares and ultimately into lifestyle brands, shorter trend cycles have started to appear in related product areas. Noticeably each fashion 'season' Missoni and Kenzo have striking surface designs for tableware (The Times (2005)). Armani has designed a range of hotels and on the European 'high street' Zara has gone into ceramic production. These examples raise the question, how long before this is a global phenomenon and seasonal trend forecasting dominates all product areas?

For designers and design companies who work within these systems this process has an integrated logic. They understand the changing nature of their suppliers and can amalgamate the cycles around changes in production, supply chains, target markets and market competitors. Using this range of inter-linked and inter-dependant information to contextualise their design and creative practice. Indeed this was historically the position of many crafts and artisan communities who worked in smaller more localised frameworks (Tyabji (1998)).

## How does the use of trend forecasting contribute to or challenge the sustainability of local craft and design cultures?



**Figure 3: Craft/artisan practice informs early stages of aesthetic trends, which filter through into trend forecasting that is typically accessed by craft/artisan production later in the trend cycle.**

Source: Graphics by ultra-indigo based on interview with Tim Hoar (ultra-indigo (2010a)) and ultra-indigo design practice

During the development of ‘aesthetic’ trend forecasting material, craft products often inform the visual imagery of colours, forms and material identities as one strand among many influences. Crafts power to influence the design process often originates from strong photographic images. The two-dimensional visual nature of forecast publications changes the understanding of objects experienced in three dimensions and this influences the creative process. There is a danger as this process risks stripping the particular knowledge embodied in craft from the equation and from any understanding of the value it might contribute.

The crafts selected as visual references often include western studio practice, contemporary crafts from global communities, alongside historic craft artefacts from museum and ethnographic collections. This diversity of ‘references’ ‘is possible because craft practitioners are typically perceived to produce ‘objects’ and not ‘product ranges’. Whilst single ‘objects’ offer the potential of further design exploitation, ‘product ranges’ come with visible research and development processes that support the associated claims to trademarks and intellectual property (ultra-indigo (2010a)).

For example, the following images have been selected from the July 2010 colour trend forecasting newsletter e:mix (figure 4). The images are of crafted objects and include glass, ceramic, textiles and furniture. Amongst the imagery only one of the designers is credited by name. In this rush for ‘free’ market information the concept of intellectual capital of the craft practitioner or designer is overlooked.

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**Figure 4: Images of craft objects informing current colour trend forecasting**

Source: Global Color Research – Mix Publications (2010)

In this context global crafts communities accessing trend material produce objects at the end of the commercial cycle and miss the peak of the market because of the development time required to incorporate trend information into the production process. In extreme examples producers are so late to the trend that they receive no benefit at all.

Alternatively, stripped of their original context and use craft items fail to address the needs or aspirations of contemporary audiences. This is unsurprising when these audiences have already seen a more relevant interpretation of these original craft artefacts presented as industrial products. The copy thus defines consumer perceptions of the original object.

In addition, these industrially produced versions will have satiated demand by supplying low cost mass produced products and subsequently destroyed access to a bespoke market for their original higher quality producer groups. The current global trend for printed summer textiles featuring Central Asian Ikat is a classic example. (highheelconfidential.com (2010)) Over the past year or so, there has been an emergence of exquisite hand-woven silk Ikat from Central Asia into the high-end textile markets. Before producer groups or even dealers could establish an effective market foothold, digital scanning has made these fabrics available to mass market manufacture. The extraordinary knowledge embodied in Ikat as a technological and cultural tradition has been subsumed within industrialised print production. Once appropriated in this fashion it becomes perceived as merely a visual device rather than understood as a cultural tradition.

Nevertheless, for many craft communities referencing trend forecasting may appear a logical response to the risk of engaging with a design-led market. However, this strategy puts local innovation into a vulnerable relationship to consumer-led value systems and inhibits the development of intellectual capital within host communities. For although support from trend forecasting material can engender a ‘feeling’ of security, if the trend forecasts drives the product development within craft communities without an inherent understanding of the craft tradition, the craft process is subjugated to a follower mentality. This shift in mindset changes the reflective conversation within crafts practice from an engagement with materials to following fashion or aping alternative material solutions. ‘In extreme cases it can breed a copyist

culture. One of the most difficult issues facing artisan practice today is that the wide spread copyist culture degrades perfectly good crafts.' This observation by designer Patty Johnson (ultra-indigo (2010b)) derives from her intimate knowledge and collaborative fieldwork with, amongst others, the Wai Wai weavers of Guyana, the Etsha Weavers Group, Okavango Delta, and Mabeo Furniture, Botswana.

By relying on trend forecasts local practitioners or those working with them can become estranged from traditional connections. With an un-interrogated idea of traditional craft objects practitioners fail to understand the historic capital within the artefacts and the process of their production and consumption. Without this understanding, alternative scenarios for the craft objects are difficult to envisage. A historically local focus and social value of craft objects make it difficult to see beyond the horizon to alternative perspectives when the context changes. For example, Pakistani roadside terracotta water containers have lost ground to aluminium or plastic alternatives. The unique ability of traditional terracotta to cool water through evaporation and to impart a particular taste is lost to the 'convenience' of contemporary containers. This seemingly small change has had a huge impact on a two thousand year old ceramic culture. This loss was interrogated and re-framed through a sensitive exploration of terracotta as a contemporary tableware material by Maham Anjum-Chesti (2006). However, the local crafts people had become so estranged from this indigenous industry that the project was re-located to Sri Lanka where culturally the material was still valued. The collaboration with Sri Lankan potters and its subsequent press coverage has refocused the global design community on the use of terracotta in the tabletop landscape.

Much of the creativity of 're-envisaging' or 'updating' traditional craft objects to become relevant to contemporary market(s) lies in understanding the potential of the initial object within its full range of original contexts, applications and meanings. From this understanding objects can be re-framed with relevance for new contexts and new markets. With this knowledge the object can be re-accessed and transformed through design. This contextual awareness, that allows creative re-interpretation, is one of the assets that a contemporary designer can bring to a collaborative process with artisan communities. Arabel Lebrusan (2007) is an exemplar, working with silver filigree, an endangered craft in her native Spain. Her field research revealed only two remaining masters of Spanish filigree still practicing. Her MA project created two bodies of work, a truly extraordinary full scale Mantilla in silver filigree and an award winning, commercially viable range of gold and silver filigree jewellery.

In the MA Design Ceramics, Furniture or Jewellery program at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London, we encourage designers to understand and interpret trends and develop many ways of thinking about how to do this. Our designers bring design knowledge into the craft process and offer alternative ways of thinking through the process of innovation. This can offer communities the ability to be objective about their historical practice and how that practice might change to become relevant in new contexts.

Contextualisation and objectification of practice, whether personal or inherited, are the most difficult tasks for any practitioner. So how does a community learn to be objective about what they actually do? There is no single reality or truth about what objective might mean in this context. It is a process of gathering thoughts and evidence in the minds of the collaborators and then making these explicit. It is important that this is not just an evidence based process but also inspirational (ultra-indigo (2010b)).

Trend forecasting can be used a part of the armoury a designer or a collaborator uses working with a community. But design thinking goes beyond these parameters. As Lila Tyabji (1998) reflects when talking about SEWA Lucknow:

'but 'design' in this case went far beyond the cut of a kurta, or the application of new embroidery buta. It included skills upgrading, the documentation and revival of traditional stitches, embroidery motifs and tailoring techniques, the introduction of new kinds of raw material ...sizing, costing, quality control, and production planning and an alternative marketing and promotional strategy...'

There is a temptation to look at trend forecasting for the surface visual information alone as if this in itself was a guarantee of success. In the same way that there is danger in stripping away the contextual and material elements of craft, it is important not to repeat this omission when reading the visuals incorporated in trend prediction. The artefacts referenced as visuals in the forecasts, in themselves incorporate a huge range of additional elements brought together to facilitate the success of the final object. The danger lies in the lack of contextualised knowledge by designers of craft and by craft of design. In order for sustainable practice to emerge, craft, design and industrial design practices have to recognize that each has strengths and limitations and they can learn from each other.

Trend forecasts can be a useful aid to contextualisation in order to examine assumptions, hidden knowledge or historical precedents, and to explain alternative cultural models. They can also be used to check where there are connections to current market interests and to review current production. Fore-

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casts help explain the relevance of current craft and artisan work to buyers, and conversely present and interpret the market place to support the different or unique selling points that craft cultures offer.

## Conclusions

This discussion around the use of trend forecasting by, for or with craft communities takes place against the background of traditional models of production breaking down as lead times and traditional relationships are challenged by global interconnectedness. The concept of 'reliable' futures extrapolated from 'known' elements, as a continuation of present practice is no longer viable.

Clearly trend forecasts are tightly edited productions that use a particular language that is entirely open to misinterpretations. They are designed to be used in a system where everyone understands how that system functions. There are many implicit layers of understanding and unspoken complexities that confound expectations of a simplistic reading by practitioners from alternative systems or models of practice. Sustainable practice demands that trends and traditions negotiate their different cultural models and the responsibility for this lies with all of us. Projects like those conducted by Patty Johnson, Maham Anjum-Chesti and Arabel Lebrusan indicate that careful and consistent collaborative practice based on thorough research and mutual respect can offer long-term and scalable solutions in academic, NGO and commercial arenas.

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