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Fingerprints in Fashion: The Influence of Handskill in Contemporary Technological Printed Textile Production and Embellishment.

The DNA of each fashion brand is, as in human DNA, unique and is often epitomised through the overall aesthetic of a brand or its creative director. Fingerprinting as a legitimate tool for identity is still widely used and even with advances made in DNA technologies a fingerprint as a unique identification tool. Due to the accessibility, ease of use and their cost effectiveness, fingerprints are still considered a legitimate tool for identification.

For the purposes of this research the “fingerprints of fashion” will be equated to the skilled handcraft practitioners that are employed in the creation of textiles for the fashion industry. The fingerprints are diverse and often difficult to identify yet this investigation will seek to demonstrate that they are still integral to the development and progression of the aesthetic of each fashion brand and it’s creations as the DNA which are embodied in the creative director, head designer or overall brand identity.

Taking the renowned luxury silk supplier Mantero Seta SpA, as a demonstrable case study the impressions of hand-skill apparent in their textile printing expertise will be showcased. The first-hand accounts of designers who continue to work by hand (See Figure 1), a variety of employee’s and Mantero family members will be analysed alongside a recent fashion textile project accomplished in collaboration with Ferragamo.

The case study will follow this year-long research and development project that commenced with one fashion brands desire to create a “handcraft” printed look for clothing, embracing traditional screen-printing on three dimensional pleated pattern pieces to create individual and unique garments (See Figure 2). It will then demonstrate how the handcrafts became involved again when the uniformity of production was not to the required standard of the brand. Reworking the project, both manually and eventually digitally, culminated in a new collaborative process between the hand and the mechanical resulting in a printed textile that although digitally rendered gives the appearance of something unique and hand-created.

This showcase of the Mantero process demonstrates a continued reliance on hand-skills and the realisation of Christopher Frayling’s intuitive statement first circulated in his 1982 article “Skill a word to start an argument” that the future would not be “Industry versus craft” but would be “craft with industry”.

The case study will further illustrate how these unique hand-skills have been instrumental in the development and improvement of digital printing on silk and prove how one brands request for a hand-craft look has led to re-examination of the importance of hand-skilled workers in an industry that has become reliant on digital processes. This presentation will seek to demonstrate how the involvement of hand-skilled workers has galvanised their importance. It will also demonstrate their ability to both evolve and enhance new technologies by embracing them in collaboration with their unique talents and showcase how their unique fingerprints are reshaping the identity of not only the textile supplier, but also leaving their impression on the big brands of fashion by enhancing their DNA with innovative thinking and experimental making processes.