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# Craft-Informed Product Design: Reviving Middle Eastern Material Cultures through Contemporary Objects

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## 1. Introduction

The current worldwide context is experiencing ever greater homogeneity of the pragmatically tangible, with governments of large economies and the political elite attempting to put a stop to or rein in this globalized production methodology that sacrifices variations of cultural expression for economic efficiency. This phenomenon is particularly frightening if we consider the Middle East's historical artisanal traditions, an area of the world that, for millennia, has been rooted in technical and aesthetic innovation that permeates the annals of global applied arts.

The need to re-think the current paradigms of design is not based firmly on potential conservative or nostalgic anxieties; rather, it is based upon the practical and ethical need to identify alternatives to the unsustainable production systems of late modernity. Flusser (2007) has argued that design by its very nature is culturally significant in the construction of the material world, and design takes place as a process that is no longer limited by the functionality of the artifacts being designed - although there can be cognitive dissonance when designers try to reconcile the level of irrelevance that design plays in respect to developing issues of identity, the environment, and relational entanglements.

The idea of "craft-informed design" is also gaining traction in this paradigm; a practice for trying to leverage established wisdom in the design of modern-day products. Craft-informed design does not merely seek a superficial appropriation of pattern in surface decoration or technique from the past and a more robust attempt to engage with and realize the philosophical and practical ideals embedded in craft traditions and reimagine them for the precepts and conditions of the present.

This research intends to understand how this process can facilitate the reclamation of material cultures in the Middle East including some examples of designers who have successfully initiated new interfaces between traditional practices and contemporary understandings. By following this path, the goal is to show that design based on artisanal processes not only provides an aesthetic alternative to the standardised object of the industrial product, but it also offers a fairer and sustainable model of economic and social conditions.

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## 2. Theoretical foundation

Studying physical cultures as complex systems of meaning has been a key concerns for sociological and anthropological work recently. According to Miller (2010), artifacts are not just idle representations of the societies that produce them; they are themselves active players in effecting social identities and relations. This is important for understanding the significance of Middle Eastern traditional artifacts, because they are not only traces of a great historical period; they are actual ongoing evidences of a culture that is always evolving. The Middle East, as a region, where time began, has evolved craft practices over thousands of years, as the site of ancient civilizations - Mesopotamia, Persia, Arabia - whose skill and aesthetic standards reflected their advanced material lives. Within this category of material culture are various traditions, such as Damascene metalwork, Iznik ceramics, Persian carpets, and elaborately-designed Levantine furniture - all of which represent more than shared historical expertise; they also articulate complete systems of knowledge that blend the cosmological, social, and economic lives of the individuals who produced them in the various forms it might take.

However, Appadurai (1986) notes how economic and cultural globalization has created flows of objects, people and ideas that have disrupted the relationships of place, culture and material production, and in terms of regions like the Middle East, this has become manifest in the growing tensions of balancing the local cultural identity with the need to operate in international markets, often, necessitating the adaptation of Western productive and aesthetic rationales.

### 2.1 Crafts as a Knowledge System

Richard Sennett (2008) suggests a comprehension of craftsmanship that goes beyond basic manual skill to encompass a distinct type of practical intelligence. According to the author, artisans form a close connection with the materials and techniques they use, gaining implicit understanding that emerges through physical and sensory experiences. This experiential understanding stands in contrast to the theoretical and formalized knowledge that

prevails in modern industrial manufacturing. Within Middle Eastern craft traditions, this viewpoint becomes especially significant. For example, the master potter of Hebron does not simply specialize in the practices of shaping and firing clay; she also blends practical ecological knowledge about the different kinds of clay in the area, the astronomy of when to produce at particular times of the year, and artistic sensitivity that reflects her cultural lineage spanning many generations.

Polanyi (1966) identifies this type of knowledge as "tacit" knowledge, which is under threat from the rapid modernization processes of many contemporary Middle Eastern societies while people are migrating from rural to urban locations, pursuing Western-style formal education, and in most places in the Middle East, accessing industrial goods in their own markets. Contemporary design is facing increasing criticism for its role in perpetuating social inequities and contributing to environmental degradation. Victor Papanek (1971), one of the original critical designers, warned about designers' social responsibility. Designers, he claimed, have power and responsibility to affect positive social change through their work. This perspective has taken on new significance in light of the recognition of ecological and social consequences of large-scale industrial production. According to McDonough and Braungart (2002), the linear production model - extract, produce, and dispose - is not sustainable anymore due to the constraints of the planet, and it demands a wholesale reconsideration of design and production methods. In this case, traditional crafts are evolving into repositories of knowledge for sustainable production methods. For centuries craftspeople throughout the Middle East have developed their techniques and skills as part of their effort to make the most out of local resources, reduce waste, and create durable goods. The Persian carpet is an example not just of a creative art, but also of a style of manufacturing that takes fibers that are locally sourced and creates durable goods; an effort that brings entire communities together and preserves skilled craftsmanship.

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### 3. The Middle East: Changing Craft Traditions

For centuries, the Middle East occupied an important niche as exploratory trade routes associated the East and West and engendered the growth of various artisanal traditions. Citizens of various urban cities including Damascus, Isfahan, Cairo and Baghdad became renowned for the craftsmanship of their products. Because of this, the Damascene metalworking craft emerged from the 12th century, which distinguished itself via a distinctive method in which gold and silver wires were layed in a different orientation on steel surfaces and combined both Persian, Arab and Turkish influences. This method relied on excelling at not just a technical level but additionally a sophisticated economic structure to produce and distribute products which depended on miners extracting the metals to merchants distributing the completed products across the known world. Likewise, the Iznik ceramic tradition, flourishing in the 16th and 17th centuries, standardized methods of glazing and decoration and influenced ceramics worldwide. The Westernization processes which began materializing in the Middle East from the 19th century eventually had a multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory relations on regional craft cultural traditions. The positive side of this development is that improved transport and communications has opened up exciting new markets for artisans -- even those in very remote areas can find a connection to buyers hundreds of miles away. This new ease of access has certainly.

However, the chance to make this transition has not come with its problems. The influx of cheap industrial product ana the lure of newer economic opportunities have caused many traditional crafts to quickly decline. One apparent illustration of this tension may be found in textiles. While older centers like Kashan in Iran and Milas in Turkey have maintained links with contemporary economic needs while still retaining their traditional ways, many regions have lost their textile traditions due to their inability to compete. Recent war and conflicts in the area have also badly affected their craft traditions. For instance, the war in Iraq has disrupted Mesopotamian craft traditions. Many crafts people have had to put down their tools and flee. So many workshops, some of which had been working for centuries, have closed. Likewise, the ongoing Syrian conflicts have disrupted established craft practices in cities like Aleppo where intriguing metalwork and woodwork traditions were being developed. These examples heighten our awareness of the fragility of culture and the need to support artisanship as they navigate this complicated and fractious landscape.

The modernizing influences in the Middle East from the 19th century onward had a distinctive and ultimately contradictory responsibility to the region's crafting heritage. On the one hand, with the new transportation and communication systems came new arenas for artisans: artisans in the most remote regions could suddenly reach international markets, and an artisan could find a buyer for their work far beyond their geographic scope. On the other hand, cheap mass-produced goods, and the allure of employment in the burgeoning modern economic work force drastically curtailed historically entrenched craft practices.

The textile industry illustrates these competing influences quite clearly. While some traditional centers (e.g., the Kashan event in Iran, or Milas, Turkey) have been able to adapt and tap into new global markets, and endure intact (in some cases grow), other places have witnessed their textile traditions collapse under industrial competition, and the mountains of conflict in recent years have aggravated the situation. Most specifically, Iraq has seen a destruction of its Mesopotamian craft heritage, and therefore, a reduction in the number of artisans who can work in the industries, while also closing several historic workshops. In turn, Syria has muddled craft traditions in places like Aleppo, which has historic significance for its woodwork and metalwork traditions, as well as similar mass disruptions of traditional traditions in much of the other cities and regions, and the long aftermath of what we understand as pre-conflict traditions.

Faced with numerous threats against traditional crafts, a host of initiatives have sprung up over the last couple of decades to both preserve and rejuvenate the rich craft traditions of the Middle East. Bodies like UNESCO through its Intangible Cultural Heritage program, have worked with local governments and artisan communities to document and preserve these invaluable techniques. The major challenge to be faced remains the desire to keep these initiatives from translating into the "museum-ification" of craft traditions, commoditizing them as opportunities for tourist engagement absent of contemporary forms of life. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) reminds us that we cannot afford to risk culture inhibition, that in trying to preserve, we create the conditions for frozen traditions, when they can and should be evolving. To provide exemplary examples of the conversation between Middle Eastern artisanal

heritage and modern design, we will examine a few designers and their projects. To consider the case of Lebanon, we can look to the influential designer Nada Debs. After graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Debs reimagines that of marquetry and wood carving. A real standout in her collection “Al Sarab” is the use of mother-of-pearl in geometric shapes of Islamic architecture, all with a contemporary twist thanks to minimalist lines and palettes. Similarly, the Tala brand, was started by the Syrian designer Josh Ward, discovering Diaspora glass making and breathing life into the technique by utilizing parts of the light source originally used before, incandescent filaments and blown glass. The use of LED, makes this new amalgamation much more energy efficient, while still carrying the narrative of a rich culture, represented through the branding. Currently, this brand is being marketed successfully in over 50 countries.

Lebanese studio Bokja, founded by Hoda Baroudi and Maria Hibri is furthermore, using historic Mediterranean textiles—Persian carpets, Palestinian embroidery and Turkish silk—to create contemporary furniture pieces. Each piece in fact, becomes an object of cultural memory, and a vessel of recorded/lived stories that can help counteract the erasure of heritage. Collectively, these projects demonstrate a representational dialogue between artisanal heritage and innovation which can create cultural relevancy and economic opportunity, and apply significant alternative practices to industrial standardization.

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#### 4. Impacts

The preservation and passing down of traditional knowledge that would otherwise be lost is possibly one of the greatest positives of craft-informed design. As Ingold (2011) explains, craft knowledge is fundamentally embodied and contextual and is passed down through practice and participant observation. It is difficult, if not impossible, in formal education systems to access and convey this type of knowledge and so collaborative practices between designers and craftspeople (practitioners) are important. In the projects highlighted, we see collaborative exchanges that reshape forms of knowledge transfer. Nada Debs has involved Lebanese design schools to create programs that couple contemporary technical learning with the learning of traditional techniques. This begins to conserve knowledge under threat of disappearance, but also forms new generations of professionals informed by craft-related traditions who will potentially be able to straddle tradition with invention.

Design informed by craftsmanship can make a significant contribution to the economic development of regions where craft traditions retain some vitality. By creating contemporary markets for products based on traditional techniques, this type of design can generate employment and income in communities that would otherwise have few economic alternatives. Tala’s consummation demonstrates a moment in which the sorts of products informed by and rooted in craftsmanship can show the potential for competition in the marketplace. As both modes of working offer paths beyond the linear relationship of production methods that dominate the current economy, craft traditions suggest differing pathways. Craft traditions have developed, by both necessity and tradition, methods of using resources that maximize product use, minimize loss, and create durable and long-lasting products. Craft practices afford the opportunity of moving towards fulfilling the goals of the circular economy to seek out ways to reduce waste through regenerative design. Bokja’s work is an example of how the tenets of craft traditions can find a place in the contemporary design. The use of old textile, reconfigured and used in different ways to produce new products, is a form of preservation of materials meant for disposal while simultaneously produces different products that actively celebrate and resist the typical modes of production typical of traditional mass-production and planned obsolescence. This discussion also demonstrates an aspect of cultural sustainability that moves beyond a focus solely on environmental sustainability. If design values and respects the meanings that a traditional material, fabric or tool represents, it recognizes cultural diversity and meanings for the future in a sustainable world which are becoming increasingly homogeneous.

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#### 5. Challenges and Future Perspectives

One of the more complicated problems craft informed design faces are for its practitioners and designers to analyze and negotiate cultural authenticity and cultural appropriation. When practitioners and designers, especially international practitioners and designers, take elements of the local craft tradition they are using in their design, questions emerge around who can use this knowledge and how the community from which it originated is guaranteed some returns in the use of it. The issue becomes further complex in the post-colonial context of the Middle East where the historical tensions between local and external cultural influences exists. Young (2008) takes an important position stating that any contemporary engagement with cultural traditions must be examined not only in their aesthetic or commercial potential, but also on what impact they have on the culture sustaining those traditions. The accounts of the designers analyzed suggest a workable solution is through a collaborative model where the craftspeople are treated as co-authors of the products that emerge, and share in distribution equitably. In practice, while the spirit of collaboration is sound, the implementation of those practices face lofty difficulties from the legal challenges of property ownership and copyright issues, to the cultural discrepancies over authorship and ownership.

Another challenge involves reconciling competing values. Traditional craft practices tend to be smaller scale and often emphasize close attention to detail and person-to-person relationships with clients. In contrast, the values attached to contemporary market scale tend to follow a logics of mass production. No doubt, some designers are experimenting with hybrid models, testing out different combinations of craft production and contemporary operations. Digital fabrication tools/technologies like 3D printing and laser cutting may allow for maintenance of artisanal values around customization and quality, while increasing efficiencies for production. However, these models continue to raise questions about how far mechanization can go before craft knowledge is vacated altogether.

The future of craft-informed design is largely dependent on the ability to train a new generation of professionals to provide the link between traditional knowledge and contemporary practices. This will require significant reform of the design education system which has wrongly emphasized either technical

or conceptual understandings of design, rather than the embodied, contextualized understanding of craft. Some schools have started to test alternate pedagogies that combine a contemporary technical training component with an apprenticeship with master craftsman. The Royal College of Art, for example, recently established a series of exchange programs for design students that allow them to work with artisans in other parts of the world, providing access to tacit knowledge that cannot be replicated through texts or classes. While exchange programs in the Middle East context may face additional challenges in regards to political volatility, creating an understanding of craft-informed design, and the economic and cultural opportunity it affords, motivates investment in a significant and innovative educational program.

## 6. Conclusions

The practice of craft-informed design represents a powerful alternative to the current dominant production models that offers approaches for protecting and reviving the plentiful material traditions of the Middle East. Drawing on exemplary cases, this essay has shown that contemporary designers can create productive dialogues with traditional knowledge, producing work that meets current needs while also being connected to the cultural tradition. While the advantages of this approach are well beyond an aesthetics level that also encompasses key social, economic and environmental issues, protecting traditional knowledge, generating employment for craft-based families, and generating sustainable alternatives to the current industrial production paradigm are all worthwhile benefits in support of a more just and balanced future. However, there are key challenges in moving from the potential to a realized. There is still much work to be done in addressing ideas of cultural authenticity, equitable sharing of benefits, and productive scaling that generates equitable opportunities for everyone, and as yet there are not many options offered to any one of those challenges. The ultimate success of craft-informed design depends on the various actors of design, craft, education, entrepreneurship, and policy all working together to create new models while respecting the integrity of tradition as well as the needs of today. The experiences of the Middle Eastern designers discussed in this paper are rich and immensely helpful for other contexts for when they too as they grapple with the challenges of maintaining their material traditions. The challenge lies not in museum-ifying these traditions, but in resourcing them in a way that gives them the potential to grow and change in response to contemporary conditions. Craft-informed design does not denounce modernity, it promotes an alternative form of modernity premised on the inter-face between different ways of knowing, and the recognition of cultural diversity as a resource for addressing 21st century problems. The craft traditions of the Middle East do not come to emerge as remnants of a dead past, but as potential seeds of a future. Supporting this requires meaningful investment in research, education, market development, and above all a mindset change to see the value of traditional knowledges not as historical relics of a moment within the past, but as resources of living relevance for addressing contemporary challenges. The pathway towards this future is far from easy, and whilst the early adopters of this approach have much experience to build upon, it needs to be noted that these experiences are also unique and may not transfer readily to all situation. However, there should be optimism that this is the moment for the consumers, investors and policymakers to start to grasp the shortcomings of current models of production and prioritised craft-informed design as a real and engaging option. The potential for a world that is a space in which cultural diversity and economic growth can happen and support one another.

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