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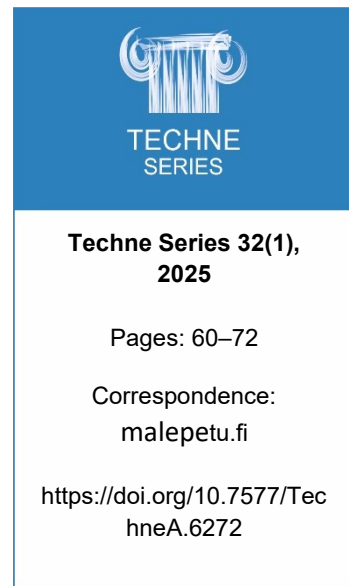
# Crafting meaningful motifs and products

## Arts-based activities to inspire ideation

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*This article reports the implementation of a crafting process aiming to enhance personal significance during the ideation phase of a nature-themed fabric motif. The ideation phase of the motif was implemented in a garden setting, and it consisted of several arts-based activities such as Dance'n'Paint, River of Experience, and creative writing. In this study, the crafting process of one participant was investigated via semiotic phenomenological analysis, leveraging the diverse materials provided by the participant. This analysis aimed to ponder how the crafting process with arts-based activities progressed from ideation to fabric motif and product creation. The findings revealed that arts-based activities significantly influenced the participant's creative process by giving the participant materials, motivation and meaningfulness for the fabric motif designing. In the study, the crafting process became meaningful for the participant as a positive experience of participation in an arts-based workshop, as a learning experience in motif designing and as a personal experience of memory work. These experiences became deeply embedded in the fabric motif and the ready-made tunic. The arts-based activities chosen for this study might apply to different contexts and themes. However, the nature theme chosen for this study might also be relevant from the sustainability perspective.*



Keywords: fabric motif design, arts-based activity, ideation, memory, meaningfulness, semiotic analysis

### Introduction

Crafting has evolved beyond its original necessity of producing items such as clothing and household supplies (Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2019) as the economic value of handmade craft products can be secondary to their makers (Väänänen, 2020). Instead, the significance of the product is more commonly associated with the process of making it or the meanings it embodies (Gandolfo & Grace, 2010; Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2019). For example, a crafted product may remind the maker or the wearer of important life events, close people, or the event of creating the product (Pöllänen & Voutilainen, 2018). An example might be knitwear made as a gift or a hand-sewn wedding dress. In this way, crafted products often carry personal stories and memories, giving them an exceptional value (Rönkkö & Yliverronen, 2024). They also function as extensions of the self, embodying their makers' personal histories, experiences, and identities (Krugh, 2014; Rönkkö, 2011).

For many people, crafting is a meaningful leisure activity that serves as a channel for self-expression, where the ability to communicate through elements, such as colors and materials, is essential (Mason, 2005; Reynolds, 2004). It has been noted that crafting can provide a break from everyday routines and offer chances to engage in gratifying activities, enhancing well-being through a sense of empowerment and autonomy (Pöllänen, 2015). Engaging in craft activities is vital in supporting mental health and overall well-being, as it fosters creativity and allows individuals to find personal meaning in their actions

(Kenning, 2015; Pöllänen, 2015). Crafting can also be a therapeutic outlet for those dealing with stress or emotional challenges (Pöllänen, 2015). Furthermore, for many individuals, crafting is increasingly viewed as a conscious response to overconsumption, offering a way to make more ecological choices (Vartiainen & Kaipainen, 2012; Väänänen, 2020).

Designers, including artisans and craft hobbyists, frequently seek inspiration to develop new product ideas (Omwami et al., 2024). During the conceptual phase, professional designers produce multiple sketches, carefully evaluating and refining them to identify promising designs for further development (Laamanen, 2016; Omwami et al., 2020). Inspiration for designing can also be drawn from mental self-generated sources, including memories, narratives, and visions of nature or everyday life (Omwami et al., 2020). Advanced designers can use concrete approaches, such as sketches, photographs, images of works of art, yarn and fabric samples, as sources of inspiration (Metz, 2006). Novice designers, however, may hesitate to create sketches or other sources of inspiration. They might have self-doubt about their skills (Booth et al., 2016) or are not yet accustomed to the practice (Härkki & Rönkkö, 2024).

This study aimed to develop a crafting process that enhances personal meaningfulness and implement concrete approaches during the ideation and design phases by utilizing arts-based activities such as dance, painting, drawing, and creative writing. Additionally, the study sought to determine how these arts-based activities and concrete approaches for ideation are transformed into a fabric motif. In this study, the primary focus of the investigation is on the fabric motif design process and the ideation for this motif. These focuses were chosen due to their flexibility and because the participants would then be able to incorporate personal meaningfulness into the fabrics and have a wide range of options for the product's design. The term 'motif' refers to any element within a design, typically indicating a repeated decorative component on fabric. In motif design, designers usually use geometrical shapes like squares, circles, and triangles, and motifs are usually inspired by nature, like flowers and plants or human characters (Hatef Jalil et al., 2024; Mulyanto et al., 2022).

The study's focus posed a challenge for the participants, as they had not previously designed a fabric motif or implemented the arts-based activities tested in the ideation phase. In this article, we present one participant's experiences, process, and outcomes. The research question for exploring this is: How did the crafting process with arts-based activities progress from ideation to fabric motif and product creation?

### **Arts-based, expressional crafting**

Craft making is not only a meaningful activity for many people but also a form of artistic creation. It has provided, and continues to provide, artists with tools and materials for their artistic expression (Lucie-Smith, 1981). The relationship between crafting and art making can be considered close, and the definitions of both concepts involve numerous context-dependent and overlapping meanings, most commonly craft art (Karppinen, 2005). Craft art is realized through a creative and holistic process, in which the ideation intention refers to the personal and reflective development of an idea and its concretization (Ihatsu, 2002; Saariaho, 2023).

Saariaho (2023) emphasizes that craft art enhances emotional experiences by evoking emotional responses and providing makers with meaningful opportunities to practice emotional expression and regulation. This form of crafting integrates the maker's personal experiences, imagination, memories, emotions, and identity while embracing the preservation and renewal of cultural traditions (Saariaho et al., 2018). In this way, crafting becomes a deeply personal process, and individuals infuse their personality into their creations (Pöllänen & Voutilainen, 2018). This personal infusion is often reflected in the strong emotional resonance and significance attached to crafted products (Gatt & Karppinen, 2014). Moreover, crafting supports personal growth by fostering skill development, enhancing a sense of competence, and offering a feeling of control over one's creative process (Pöllänen & Voutilainen, 2018; Rönkkö, 2011).

In addition to craft art, this type of crafting can be described as expressive crafting. Expressive crafting describes the creative and artistic practice, serving as a means to discover the meaningfulness of crafting and as an individual's intentional making activity that results in a unique crafted product (Karppinen, 2005). The source of expression lies in the maker's sensitized and awakened self, through which individuality, uniqueness, and the capacity to assign personal meaning to the products are explored (Karppinen, 2005). In this sense, crafting can be seen as approaching arts-based practice, where the intention is to convey a personally meaningful message, and the individual experiences a deep, internal sense of fulfillment through the maker's creative process (Rönkkö, 2011).

## **Methods**

### **Placing the workshop**

The study began with a workshop in western Finland's Rauma Seminar Garden over a weekend in the fall of 2022. This garden, established in 1897, found the town center. The garden hosts diverse plant species, including those in the greenhouse, summer flowers, perennials, vegetables, herbs, spices, shrubs, and trees. It is an essential educational resource for teacher trainees and pupils from local schools (Ruokonen & Lepistö, 2021). Known for its conducive environment for study and relaxation, the garden also functions as a living classroom where historical gardening skills, once crucial for daily life and nutrition, are taught and explored (Kokkonen & Kortelahti, 2018)

The workshop consisted of several arts-based activities for ideation. All outputs of the process were study data (Table 1). The first part combined dance, music, and visual expression. This activity, called '*Dance'n'Paint*' was conducted in the garden and developed by the dancer Rauha Hartt. During the Dance'n'Paint session, Rauha Hartt guided participants in exploring their movement and visual expression. Music-inspired movement, reflected in painting, aimed to experience a connection with the body, movement, colors, and shapes (Rauha Hartt Official Website, 2024).

The participants reflected on these paintings, which served as a source for the next task, the '*River of Experience*' [*River*]. This task was adapted from Burnard's (2002) framework, which describes the temporal and spatial dimensions of personal experiences. It is a multimodal, often visual representation that captures significant moments an individual has encountered at specific times, centered around a particular theme, and the meanings those moments hold. During this activity, participants freely recalled various experiences and expressed them visually and in writing on A3 paper using colored pencils. Most participants structured their Rivers chronologically, illustrating memories and feelings such as their childhood homes, foraging for mushrooms and berries in forests, and climbing perilous cliffs.

After completing their Rivers, participants wrote sketched text inspired by the River exercise. They were encouraged to write freely, picking on key words and themes from their Rivers. These texts explored how the visualized experiences had emotionally affected them, allowing for deeper personal reflection. The resulting narratives then served as the foundation for composing poems centered on experiences, transforming raw emotion and memory into literary expression.

After these arts-based activities, the fabric motif design phase started. This task involved creating a fabric motif based on the paintings, Rivers, sketched texts and poems from the ideation phase, aiming for the participants to continue processing the experiences by visualizing the feeling or the event. The motif design was guided by professional textile designer Elina Savolainen, who has developed an individual fabric design method called '*Draw Your Motifs*' ('*Piirrä omat kuosisi*®') (Elina Savolainen Official Website, 2024). In the workshop, participants had two options for designing the motifs: The first option was to cut abstract or representational parts from our previous paintings, and the second option was to draw or paint new motifs inspired by the paintings, Rivers and poems. The designs of the motifs were scanned once the motifs were painted or glued onto the design base. The digital arrangement of motifs was finalized in PaintShop Pro, ensuring the motif was repeated uniformly in all directions. The fabric design was compiled into a report, which was used to order digitally printed fabric.

After designing the fabric motifs, the participants selected fabric materials based on the motifs and the product's intended purpose. A few months later, participants were provided with fabrics printed digitally in a factory according to the designed fabric motifs. They sewed products, such as apparel and tablecloths, independently at home or in a collaborative sewing workshop. In January 2023, participants were photographed in the same garden, where the process began three months earlier, with their products. For the photograph, they chose the locations and poses that illustrated their experiences, the creative process and suited to the product. These photographs were given to the participants as a memento of the process.

### The participant

Six people participated in the workshop series, including the authors of this article. The participants, all women aged between 50 to 60, brought diverse perspectives and experiences in crafting. For this study, we selected one participant to examine her creative process in more detail. Marja, a dedicated craft teacher, was chosen due to her extensive background in the field. She has been specialized in crafts in textile work and teaches students aged 7 to 14 in both primary and secondary education. Marja stood out for having the longest teaching career in crafts among the participants and for her lifelong engagement with a wide range of crafting. Further, she was keen to ponder the possibilities of concrete approaches, like arts-based activities, with primary and secondary school students.

### Data collection and data analysis

The study employed design research as its methodological approach. Design research serves as a practical framework for developing innovations, refining practical applications, and integrating theory with the development of practical solutions (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). This study's design research provided insight into making patterns and helped construct a robust framework to advance this approach.

This study's primary data consists of participant's process outputs: paintings from Dance'n'Paint, River, sketched texts, a poem, motif designs, a fabric, and a final product (Table 1). Secondary data, such as email interview with the participant, were also used. In addition, reflections were captured through collaborative discussions among participants, and the authors made notes related to the process. (Table 1). Translations from Finnish to English of original expressions (e.g., poem) from the participant were included in the presentation of the findings.

**Table 1.**

#### *Workshop tasks and data quality*

<i>Data</i>	<i>Task</i>	<i>Quality</i>
Paintings from Dance'n'Paint	<i>Immerse yourself in the garden and its surroundings. You can express yourself through dance and movement.</i>	Visual data
River of Experience	<i>Draw and write based on your experiences, might be inspired by Dance'n'Paint</i>	Textual and visual data
Sketched texts	<i>Write freely and pick important words from the River</i>	Textual data
Poems	<i>Write a poem based on sketched texts</i>	Textual data
Motif designs	<i>Sketch and draw a motif based on earlier exercises</i>	Visual data
Photos of the products	<i>Select a location where you would like to be photographed with your product</i>	Visual data
Interview via email	<i>Questions (such as "What was the meaning of the experience in motif design?")</i>	Textual data

The data analysis relied on the traditions of multimodal analysis (Baudry & Thibault, 2006), examining how different modes of communication (such as text and images) interact to create meaning (Table 1). Additionally, the data were examined via semiotic lenses to address the research question. Semiotic lenses meant applying Peirce's (1932) semiotic analysis, including his phenomenological categories

(Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness) and utilizing Luutonen’s (1997) and Rönkkö’s (2011) views on the semiotic approach to crafting (Table 2).

The research question addressed the progression of the crafting process from ideation to the fabric motif and product implementation. This was examined at the level of Firstness, where the maker’s initial inspirations for ideation were explored, including mental images of the process or the product. At the level of Secondness, the focus was shifted to the selection of craft technologies, the progression of the making process, any changes that occurred during production, and potential challenges encountered. At the level of Thirdness, the maker’s evaluation of the craft process within the semiosphere is analyzed. This included an investigation of the process as experienced by the maker, the outputs generated during the process, the associated experiences, and the value-based choices made by the maker. (Table 2).

**Table 2.**

*Semiotic data analysis*

<i>Phase of analysis</i>	<i>Crafting phase applied according to Luutonen (1997) and Rönkkö (2011)</i>
<i>Firstness</i>	Orientation Ideation
<i>Secondness</i>	Design and making
<i>Thirdness</i>	Reflection

## Findings

### Firstness

As an orientation, the Dance'n'Paint session took place in the garden, combining painting and dance into a performative experiment. The resulting paintings were energetic "evidence" of the dance, creating two A0 canvas paintings with acrylic colours while dancing. The garden environment, which allowed for free movement and activities at one’s own pace, seemed to promote concentration on the Dance'n'Paint session and enabled creativity to flow freely. During the Dance'n'Paint session in the garden, Marja painted two A0-sized canvases, one with a blue base that felt more natural for further development. (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

*The top image features Marja’s painting from Dance'n'Paint session, the bottom left Marja working in the garden, and the bottom right depicts Marja reflecting on the next phase, the River of Experience.*





poetic element as well as an impression of rhythm and dynamism. Small pieces of tape labeled 'PIPOMETSÄ' (Pipo Forest) and 'METSÄ' (Forest) were placed throughout the design, reflecting the motif's inspiration. Initially, she included the text "Taata's girl," but she removed it in the final steps (Figure 3).

All the elements (the torn parts from the original painting and the words) were carefully glued on the design base, and the fabric motif was scanned to continue working digitally. The digital arrangement of the fabric motif was finalized with Elina Savolainen. The fabric motif was compiled into a report, which was used to order digitally printed fabric. Marja chose linen as the fabric selected for its natural qualities, which she believed would best complement the garment's design she had in mind. She appreciated linen's breathability and durability, anticipating that these properties would enhance the finished garment's comfort and aesthetic appeal.

**Figure 3.**

*On the left is Marja's fabric motif draft before digitalization, and on the right is the motif after digitalization.*



Designing the fabric motif was challenging, even though Marja received help from Elina with digitization after the workshop. The challenges were mainly due to a need for more time, guidance, and structured instructions, particularly given the novice experience in motif design. Marja verbalized this:

We received many different ideas on how to proceed with fabric design. At this point, more time for personal experimentation would have been needed to gain experience with various implementation methods. (Marja, interview)

However, completing the process was relatively effortless for Marja. The fabric arrived from printing a few months after the motif design workshop. Upon receiving the finished fabric, she was pleasantly surprised by the appearance of the large-scale design. By then, Marja had drawn the patterns from a fashion magazine and modified them to align with her vision for a short tunic. She decided the tunic did not require a lining since it was sleeveless and draped well. With her experience in sewing, Marja

quickly sewed the relatively simple garment without experiencing any challenges, but she desired to complete it in a collaborative sewing workshop.

### **Thirdness**

For Marja, the completed garment was considered a success. The tunic and the fabric motif carried not just the memories of the creative process but also a strong emotional connection to the forest of her childhood and her grandfather. When wearing the tunic, she carries the memory of her grandfather and his forest with her. For her, *Pipo Forest*, as depicted in the fabric motif, serves as a sanctuary of creativity and serenity, a place where she often wanders to find inspiration and solace. She feels that seeing the fabric motif in the tunic takes her to the forest and gives her a sense of peace and fulfilment (Figure 4).

The tunic holds significant meaning, reminding me of the various stages of the process. The fabric carries a strong emotional connection to my late grandparents. Now, through the dress, I carry childhood memories and my story. -- The process gave me a new way of approaching and teaching design. Immersing myself in the process and trusting it would carry through to the end was crucial. Creativity and innovation were present throughout the entire process. Overall, the experience was empowering and positive. (Marja, interview)

### **Figure 4.**

*The fabric motif and the tunic in the present-focused photo (photo: Essi Miettinen)*



Overall, the entire process was enlightening for Marja. The urban garden provided an intriguing starting point. The garden inspired her, fostering creativity and allowing her to draw upon our personal experiences and memories while reflecting on and sharing them. This setting facilitated arts-based expression and enhanced the motif design process.

Marja considered this process and the various arts-based methods meaningful. The analysis of her fabric motif revealed that in the fabric motif design process, she mainly utilized the painting from the

Dance'n'Paint session, which played a dominant role on a concrete level. However, the other activities, the River of experiences and the creative writing exercises, seemed to deepen the experience and connect the painting to Marja's previous experiences. During the process, the abstract painting from the Dance'n'Paint session became the forest of her childhood. In the final fabric motif, Marja emphasized the importance of the childhood forest by visibly stating the meaning of the forest on the fabric motif itself. One might say that the painting served as a platform for Marja to make meaningful experiences visible and both the workshop, the process of designing the fabric motif, and the finished fabric motif were meaningful to her.

Marja found that processing and sharing experiences and memories was a profoundly emotional experience. She was somewhat surprised by the strength of her connection to nature from childhood. Indeed, her nature memories focused on childhood and formed a continuum from childhood to adulthood, centering on experiences with important people, such as a family member. Childhood nature experiences appeared to be strongly associated with a sense of community.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

This study investigated a design and crafting workshop that aimed at unleashing participant's creativity through arts-based activities in the ideation phase of a crafting process and resulting in a fabric motif and a craft product. The results of one participant, Marja, show that the arts-based approaches tested in the study supported Marja's ideation, acted as concrete approaches for ideation and enhanced the meaningfulness of a craft process and a product, like a fabric motif. The results of the study show that the arts-based outputs implemented during the workshop served different purposes: the painting provided material and a starting point for the motif design, while the creative writing assignments brought emotional memories to the surface, enhanced the meaningfulness, and motivated the participant in designing a meaningful fabric motif and crafted product. The process resembled the craft art process, where individuals can seek meaning in their making through craft art and simultaneously strengthen their sense of identity (Saariaho, 2023).

The analyses of Marja's process indicate that this kind of workshop might enhance the meaningfulness of crafting for novice and more experienced designers. This conclusion is due to notion that in the process meaningfulness was apparent in many levels: 1) Marja was able to process and visualise her emotions towards nature and her relatives, 2) she had the opportunity to share these emotions with others by multimodal meaning making and socially interacting with others and 3) she was successful in designing a fabric motif for the first time. Further, at the end of the workshop, she sewed a tunic out of the self-made fabric motif and the tunic became a metaphor for all these multi-layered meanings aroused during the process. As Entwistle (2000) states, clothing can be a powerful medium for expressing personal narrative as it evokes a sense of self and personal history and communicates much about an individual's thoughts and values. It is also noteworthy that the photograph taken after the workshop further enhanced the meaningfulness and highlighted the process's value, the fabric motif and the tunic for Marja.

It seems that phenomenological analysis is well-suited for examining the craft process and the product that emerges from it. Firstness highlights the importance of ideation in the analysis, capturing the atmosphere and memories that shape initial impressions in fabric motif design. Secondness serves as the contextual dimension, where the maker designs both the fabric motif and the apparel in a way that feels personally meaningful. Thirdness reveals the layered significance of both the process and the final output.

In the study, the process theme was nature and nature-related memories of the participants. This theme proved to be a useful choice from the perspective of meaningfulness and ideation. However, all the arts-based activities implemented in the workshops can connect with any meaningful theme, like relationships, personal history or future plans. Further, an interesting starting point for the activities

might be a shared experience, like an excursion, a movie or a fictional framework. Further, the activities implemented in the workshops apply to various educational contexts. They can be easily adapted as integrated or transversal learning tools in primary and secondary school contexts. The most challenging phase of the craft process was transforming the creative outputs into a fabric motif. For school contexts, this phase could be simplified or modified: If the fabric motif is chosen as the output, it does not need to be factory-printed; it can involve image transfer, stamp printing, or machine embroidery. Alternatively, clothing can be an option, such as working with the material from scratch or finding a suitable fabric. In general, the workshops seemed to contain many elements that might bring engagement to the learning (See learning engagement McGeown & Smith, 2024): the garden environment, learning partly outdoors, having possibilities for social interaction and sharing the outputs with others, getting emotionally connected to the process and being posed to a cognitive challenge.

The study's results are consistent with previous studies on memory work (Baddeley et al., 2014) as the study shows how memories are intertwined and how, for example, the memories of nature are connected to humans and everyday events. Further, the study illustrates how a person's connection to nature is often an intergenerational experience (Rautio, 2017) and includes a certain amount of choices (Hyvärinen, 2014). For example, Marja's fabric motif showed her deep relationship with both nature and her relatives, and she chose to concentrate on her grandfather and their forest. It seems that during the process the experiences or memories chosen by the participant became deeply embedded and empowered her to feel as if she was carrying her childhood memories in the fabric motif and the tunic. These results align with previous studies, which indicate childhood memories shape adult habits, perceptions, values, and attitudes (Nurmi, 2023). Further, the findings indicate that the arts-based activities, as well as the fabric motif process, might be implemented to nurture a sense of environmental stewardship and support a positive relationship with nature (Cantell et al., 2020; Parikka-Nihti & Suomela, 2014).

By examining an individual's creative process, this study highlighted the workshop's role in inspiring ideation. It demonstrated the feasibility of working with personal experiences and memories in a multi-phase arts-based process. However, more research is needed to deepen our understanding of these processes. The study shows that crafting with arts-based elements can be seen as a vibrant and sustainable activity that bridges design and art, with its strength in its experimental and developmental nature. Generally, craft makers draw inspiration from mental self-generated sources, including memories, narratives, and visions of nature or everyday life (Omwami et al., 2020). The study showed the potential of a crafting approach, with the crafting process being both successful and emotionally impactful for the participants. The participant's internal and external experiences were expressed through arts-based activities during the workshop, resulting in fabric motifs and crafted products that embodied the multi-layered experiences aroused during a crafting process.

### **Limitations**

This study focused on the experience of one crafting process, offering a detailed description. It should be noted that the findings are not intended to be generalized.

The researchers were not just observing but also participants in the workshop. This dual role of observer and participant could have introduced potential biases, as the researchers' involvement may have influenced both their perceptions and the behaviour of other participants. Despite these limitations, the participants were keen to participate in the study and share the materials they produced during the workshop for research purposes.

In every stage of the study, ethical principles of research with human participants in the human sciences in Finland (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK guidelines, 2019) were followed. For approval, the participants were provided information about the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) matters, and they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time.

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