PATTERN AND DECORATION:
ITS PLACE IN ART

A CREATIVE PROJECT
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MASTER IN ARTS

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The primary objective of this creative project is the development of a series of mixed media paintings that centers on the exploration of pattern and decoration and its place in our contemporary society and visual culture. This seven painting series will explore abstractions of the Flower of Life motif and its components and be comprised of layers and stages using a mixture of paint, stenciled design, and varying opacities of collaged, hand-cut paper. Each layer through the last will be a bold and sometimes ambiguous variation of the Flower of Life motif. In this body of work I will focus on the Flower of Life image and its nature as an image common in our culture but one with a largely unknown history that goes back to the time of ancient civilizations and the creation of the world.
“The decorative for a work of art is an extremely precious thing. It is an essential quality. It does not detract to say that the paintings of an artist are decorative.”

-Henri Matisse

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

How often do we as viewers (outside of the artistic world) question where a particular design was derived, or pattern discovered? Every day we are overwhelmed by visual stimulation via television, Internet, magazines, and countless other forms. We often take our visual world for granted and usually cease to wonder just where and when a certain image originated, or what it may have symbolized when it was first created. Through my paintings, I seek to evoke the roots of several patterns and decorative motifs, as well as highlight the fleeting art movement of Pattern and Decoration of the 1970s and its small group of followers.

During the creative process of my painting series, I spent time exploring ways to layer acrylic paints and various types and colors of tissue paper to achieve the surface combinations that I desired. Through this experience I have created a body of work that is focused on pattern and formal aesthetics, explorations into visual space, adventurous color combinations, and nuanced decorative surfaces. The hand cutting of my papers creates a graphic sense that paint alone cannot achieve and echoes the simple shapes and patterns used in quilting. The paintings will be intricate, bold, and
colorful and include a wide range of notions about pattern and design from ritualistic and spiritual beginnings to the everyday interactions with form and function.
INFLUENCES

The inspiration for this creative project comes from my fascination with and research into the ancient art of Sacred Geometry and the Pattern and Decoration Movement. My initial influence pertains to the decorative motifs that I chose to explore compositionally in my work. My governing pattern choice came from the Flower of Life image and its connection with Sacred Geometry.

I used the intricate geometrics of the Flower of Life image as a driving force for my designs. I have been engrossed in pattern throughout my artistic career, but had never taken the next step to investigate the origin of any particular design or pattern. When my research led me to this intricate looking pattern I was stunned to find that it possessed such a breadth of information about our lives and the world around us. It encompasses our entire being. Immediately after becoming aware of the design and its many variations, I began seeing it used in the most unlikely of places ranging from my grandmother’s traditional antique quilts to Pier One’s upcoming season of décor.
Figure 1. The Flower of Life

This symbol is steeped in history. The oldest known example is on the Temple of Osiris in Egypt and is symbolically woven through Christianity, Judaism, and New Age spiritual meditation. Simply put, the flower of life (Figure 1) can be described as a geometric figure composed of multiple, evenly spaced, overlapping circles that are arranged so they form a flower like pattern with six-fold symmetry (Wicherink).

It is said that the symbol itself is a disguise to hide the five geometrical forms, which are thought to be templates from which all life springs (Wicherink). Each of the five forms is a template for one of the earthly elements; earth, wind, fire, water, and ether. The platonic solids, as they are referred, have very remarkable characteristics aside from creating the natural world. For one, they all fit perfectly within a sphere. This means that all five shapes (tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron, and the icosohedron) are all hidden within certain points and intersections of the Flower of Life symbol. Indeed, the Flower of Life is a geometric marvel. For ages, Sacred Geometry
has been preserved carefully. Why sacred, what is so sacred about geometry? In spiritual mystery-schools of the past it was taught that sacred geometry was used by God to create the universe (Wicherink). We now know that sacred geometry contains many mysterious elements that elegantly describe many phenomena such as the growth of plants, the proportions of the human body, the orbit of the planets, light, the structure of crystals, music, and our DNA, just to name a few (Hemenway, 150).

Aside from the visual attraction I had for the Flower of Life symbol, I wanted to better understand what so many before me held in such high regard scientifically and spiritually. As I immersed myself in research I added clarity to my own spiritual feelings. From a very young age flowers, insects, and the natural world always fascinated me. I felt most spiritual and at peace in the silence of the woods and shied away from organized religion. After all my research I felt I could finally put an image and words to how I felt spiritually. I chose the patterns and décor within my work to acknowledge this enigmatic and powerful symbol and its divisions, which characteristically go unnoticed.

To produce the paintings for my creative project I was greatly influenced by several artists with vastly different styles, yet found that they were bound by pattern and decoration. None of them are the same age, or are contemporaries of one another; however they possess the same appreciation for the same movement that has always been underappreciated by the fine art world. The Pattern and Decoration
movement took place in the 1970s with only a quaint following and several fleeting moments of recognition. Its followers had a profound knowledge of Art Nouveau and an appreciation for images not typical of modernist high art. Instead they found their inspiration through such areas as textiles, architecture, and wallpaper. The foremost goal for this group was to challenge what these artists saw as the narrow confines of minimalist ideology, the chilly detachment of conceptual art, and the dominance of heroic abstraction (Anderson-Spivy, 36).

Within this small group of artists I unexpectedly found them separate of each other. Philip Taaffe, Robert Kushner, and Beatriz Milhazes have been highly influential to my work even though they approach decoration in very different ways. The only artist of the three that had a hand in the actual movement was Robert Kushner. He and well-known artist, Miriam Schapiro, essentially paved the way for other artists to partake in the decorative and ornamental outside of functional utility. Taaffe and Milhazes witnessed the decorative uprising and joined the group in the late 1980s, embracing the ideology of the Pattern and Decoration movement with their own individuality and distinctive flair. All of them embody the same characteristic decorative painting styles; all use pattern and decoration as their subject matter, all use non-traditional methods for either support or surface, and the subject must always be secondary to the visual experience of the work.
The most influential artist for my work and myself is Philip Taaffe. Taaffe emerged in the mid 1980s, making a name in the art world with his massive, mixed media paintings. His paintings are not really paintings at all; most are made with multiple, elaborate screen prints atop each other forming rich surfaces, dominated by strong symmetry and balance. Taaffe’s imagery is derived from ornamentation created in a variety of regions across the world from ancient times to the present. For instance, Islamic architectural design, Art Nouveau style, and the look of early botanical photography are all visible within his body of work. Taaffe does not concentrate on a single icon, instead an enormous variety of themes and motifs overlap and intertwine through his work (Adams). Taaffe’s painting Ceremonial Abstraction (Figure 2) is a good example of his technique, and of the design sense that inhabits most of his art. Within this piece, he utilizes radial symmetry and exaggerates its impact with a square picture plane.

Being a printmaker at heart, I instantly was fascinated by Taaffe’s artistic process and product. Instead of printing, I began hand-cutting tissue paper in the same manner. I discovered I could attain a printed appearance and graphic edge and also gain a texture that differed from the gestural painting approach. The use of tissue paper also offered other advantages. Though its delicacy could be problematic, I could cut several layers at once and with a steady hand, produce beautiful, symmetrically balanced, hand-cut stencils.
Another major artistic influence is Robert Kushner. Kushner is the leader of my influences and has received praise for staying true to decorative art, even under harsh criticism. He was a co-conspirator in the Pattern and Decoration movement from the beginning and his work has become its most popular visual icon. Kushner’s art differs from the other decorative influential pieces by its organic nature; much of it is derived from Japanese painting and Chinese pattern books. Through intense study he mastered
a sweeping, calligraphic style where he was capable of repeating organic images that were remarkably identical (Anderson-Spivy, 34). To this, he incorporated fabrics, metallic leaf, and trails of glitter; all considered extremely decorative and against the cannon of high modernism. Kushner completed every decorative painting for the sheer joy of it, while energetically challenging what it was to be considered fine art.

Figure 3. Robert Kushner, The Lake and Forest, 1975 Acrylic on cotton, 124x231 inches

Rather than Kushner’s exuberant botanical themed patterns, I was more influenced by his use of contrast, directional variation, and segmented grounds as can be seen in The Lake and Forest (Figure 3), a painting that he completed in 1975 during the height of the Pattern and Decoration movement. Kushner achieves his directional variation and segmented grounds in several different ways. As seen in (figure 2) he cut the finished work into pieces and reconstructed it in a visually pleasing manner. In many of his other works he used bold contrasting colors and values to push and pull the
viewer’s eye through the composition. Kushner shows his skill as a designer by his ability to turn an average pattern into a dynamic undulation of color and flora. With my more geometric motifs, I challenged myself to create shallow space and a more in depth and intriguing visual experience that supersedes the pattern itself.

The next artist who influenced me from the Pattern and Decoration Movement is Beatriz Milhazes. Milhazes is the most modern artist to bestow her decorative work, with her first one-woman show taking place in 1993. Born in Brazil, Milhaze’s paintings are filled with curvilinear and rectilinear shapes painted with gaudy color. Her approach and technique is perhaps the most akin to my own. She begins a simple series of dots; from those dots various elements start to divide and grow exponentially. A vague visual in her mind guides her, but she relies on chance and interpretation to decide the final piece (Kerguehennec, 62). In *Pacaembu* (Figure 4), Milhazes begins with a foundation of strong vertically placed lines, varying in thickness and color, and then proceeds to build upon them with contrasting organic and decorative forms. Rosettes, bouquets, and similar filigree explode about the canvas, acting as a vehicle for her vast pallet of vivid color. Her paintings are intricate and busy, yet everything seems to have a precise location where it was meant to be. Her home in Brazil is a common influence in her work evidenced through her use of color, flora, and patterns reminiscent of local customs, family, and lifelong ambiance. While she realizes that she artistically goes against the tide of established rule, she feels that the decorative arts have a way like no other, of reflecting human activity (Kerguehennec, 71).
Figure 4. Beatriz Milhazes, *Pacaembu*, 2004 Acrylic on canvas

Her application of paint is the most eccentric of these few Pattern and Decoration artists. She works with the basic principles of collage by painting plastic sheets with her decorative motif, and glues the finished image to the canvas. If she visually likes the placement she peels it from the plastic, like a decal, and places it by attaching it to the painting surface with acrylic medium. She uses mostly transparent colors for her decals; this allows her to see how they react to existing elements in the painting. With this technique she has complete control over where she places even the smallest of visual components. Milhazes’ placement technique translates well to my tissue paper applications. The translucency of the tissue paper allows me to temporarily place my
cut decals on my paintings without any debilitating effect on the surface. Like Milhazes, once I feel I have a sound composition I lay in my cut paper and attach them.
PROCESS AND DESCRIPTION OF ARTWORKS

As an artist, I feel I have struggled with what people describe as decorative art. As if to say, that a piece of art that is depicted as decorative is less worthy of being art.

The term “decorative art” is defined as ornamental elements in functional works, in categories ranging from metal, ceramics, furniture, and textile and often categorized in opposition to the fine arts (Fleming, 22). Many understand decorative to mean feminine, crafty, and domesticated; all adjectives that create panic for those with elitist views about the significance of “high” modern art.

With this said my goal as an artist is to create paintings where the subject matter is secondary to the visual experience of the work. This is not to say that I disregard the profound meaning and content housed within my subject matter, rather I consider formal elements and principles of design to transform a chosen decorative motif into a personal artistic vision. It is my belief that a well-composed and harmonious image can be beautiful while successfully conveying content. It is my way of showing my appreciation for the talented artisans before me and celebrating centuries of ornament.

All of my paintings for this series start in the same manner. I begin with my canvas on the floor of my studio and apply several layers of abstract imagery and mark
making. This ground will not be highly visible in the finished painting but helps to guide color choice and build an initially visceral surface. Generally, I try to work with transparent colors to preserve the existence of previous layers and reinforce the technique displayed by the tissue paper. To aid in this approach, I use Self-Leveling and Tar Gel mediums, which are completely transparent and lend to extending colors on a large surface. Both mediums work well visually with my paper application and assist in my desire to work translucently. Not only does this provide a rich ground upon which to begin, it also offers a moderate texture and a visual history.

Through much experimentation with different painting techniques I came to the conclusion that I was unable to retain the sharp graphic edge that I was seeking with paint alone. I began experimenting with all sorts of papers in search of one that would supply a graphic edge and not detract from my painting with overpowering opacity. I found that various densities of tissue paper supplied the clean edge that I sought and created the transparency that reveals the painted elements.

From this paper experimentation emerged the first painting of my series, *Ascending Diamonds* (Figure 5). This painting was a success for me, as it proved I could join paper and paint with confidence to create a layered decorative surface. At the outset I used an easily cut diamond pattern due to the fragility of tissue paper, but was pleasantly surprised to find that with gentle treatment, it responded with resiliency.
Encouraged, I began to cut more intricate designs, which helped to broaden my decorative expression.

![Figure 5. Ascending Diamond, 2008. Acrylic, Oil, Paper on canvas. 32x59”.

The second painting in this series, *Nature’s Blueprint* (Figure 6), was inspired by a shape that naturally occurs in our environment and has been used for centuries to tessellate floors, textiles, and walls in magnificent and dramatic style. Many striking quilting patterns are derived from this simple yet unique progression. The honeycomb
produced by honeybees or the hexagon shape, is a regular polygon and explained by mathematicians as a regular shape arranged to completely fill, or tile, a plane with no gaps or overlaps (Hemenway, 159). It is not by chance that honeybees create their homes using hexagons, a form that is mathematically efficient.

Figure 6. *Nature’s Blueprint*, 2008. Acrylic and Paper on canvas. 20x54”. 
I approached the foundation of this painting in the same manner of layering and surface enrichment. Atop the base layer I placed linear cut strips of white paper crossing in a random arrangement. I was interested in using a found decorative paper that featured a small, interconnected hexagon pattern and after much cutting and deconstruction, created a draping effect using cut pieces vertically on the canvas. The vertical composition is further emphasized with three large, symmetrically placed hexagons created by an implied line of smaller hexagons.

With every painting I learned something new about paper and paint applications and what combinations of color and patterns worked compositionally. While I do not believe that this painting is one of my most successful, I discovered that rather than using only the cut shapes, I could also use the leftover negative space in a productive and aesthetically pleasing way. This discovery opened new doors in my mind for new forms, new layers, and new paintings to come.
After *Nature’s Blue Print* I created *Bloom of Existence* (Figure 7), which marked another vital learning experience. In previous pieces any under-painting work was done with a brush or by pouring and spattering techniques. This painting was the first one where I began cutting cardboard stencils to create a patterned background; an inspiration I garnered from Philip Taaffe. This particular stenciling is not the focal point of my finished piece but provides a pleasant secondary subplot to work upon and offers the viewer an intriguing element upon close inspection.
The stencil that I created was taken from a portion of the Flower of Life symbol. This petal-like component is commonly known as the Ichthus symbol, similar to the contour of a football. After the initial use of the petal image it continued to be a central and recurring design throughout my body of work. This pleasant, arc-edged shape is very common in design and is especially current and visible on the bumper of many vehicles in the form of a fish proclaiming the owner’s belief or disbelief in Christianity. It is constructed by two circles intersecting at their midpoint and was even appropriated by early Christians to proclaim their faith in a secretive way to avoid persecution (Wicherink). I have no religious views toward the symbol but find it elegant and its history intriguing.

Over the stenciled background, I added large hand-cut sheets of circular patterns covering the whole surface. The yellow transparency of the tissue paper created a soothing green color over the mostly blue ground and also produced a faux texture and graphic edge. The next layer featured my central image where I wanted it to repeat the Ichthus (petal) symbol. After many adjustments I decided to employ radial symmetry with over-sized and multi-colored Ichthus patterns. By accentuating the warm tones of the Ichthus (petal) with oil paints, I was able to create a convincing shallow space in contrast to the cool background. At the conclusion of this piece, I gained confidence in overlapping many layers of tissue paper and learned that if the tissues were layered in the correct order they produced colors that looked as if they had been optically mixed.
Figure 8. *Buried Ornaments*, 2008. Acrylic and Paper on canvas. 29x64”.

In the next painting, *Buried Ornaments* (Figure 8) I collected the most successful aspects of my prior paintings and added several new techniques that I discovered along
the way. I began this painting with the motivation of finding a decorative motif that was more organic and dynamic, compared to my other pieces that are highly geometric.

I chose the more curvilinear, flower-like equivalent, the Fleur-de-lis, translated from French, the “lily flower”. The Fleur-de-lis is not technically from Sacred Geometry, but it does share the same long-standing history in ornament and decoration. The petals of the Fleur-de-lis resemble a stylized Ichthus, and both share a connection to a flower. Even though this pattern is not related directly to my previous influences, I feel it shows my growth and maturity as a visual artist. I believe it is a logical outgrowth of my extensive research concerning the decorative arts, but also demonstrates my ability to step out of the Flower of Life symbol and incorporate other imagery.

_Buried Ornaments_ is the first painting that I started using a black base. This was an unconscious choice as an artist, and black became an intuitive leap that worked in my favor, as it added a great amount of simulated depth. As this painting developed, it was obvious that the dark base accentuated my pattern and design elements and added some needed contrast. The same layering processes were followed with a stenciled base, abstract pours, and loose brushwork. However, with the creation of this piece I created a technique that was new to my work. While applying a red abstract pour I simply swept the middle out of a partially dried puddle; to my surprise it left a curious thin outline like a burst bubble or biomorphic shape. I continued this technique over the whole surface in a bright red that added a welcome vitality.
The technique and application of tissue paper changed slightly with this painting. I used a more opaque tissue for the positive-negative motif in the middle ground adding contrast, then topped with a warm yellow paper creating a pleasant overlapping effect. The contours of the yellow paper share the same organic edge that I had recently discovered through my removal process of partially dried drips of red paint. Ambiguous at first glance, the interior shapes are multiple fleurs-de-lis all symmetrically cut and positioned. As an artist I feel strongly that this painting is my most successful and that it presages the style of my future work through composition, color choice, and content.

Figure 9. *Encircling Life Forms, 2009. Acrylic and Oil on canvas. 50x50”.*
The painting, *Encircling Life Forms* (Figure 9), is the only painting in my series that does not utilize paper and collage techniques. I made this choice for several aesthetic reasons. First, through many experiences with tissue paper, I knew it was not possible to attain the color and transparency that I sought. Secondly, I could not achieve the large-scale circles I wanted for my design due to limited sizes of tissue paper available. So I determined that I would use an acrylic base and create the geometric image with transparent oil colors.

The creative process for *Encircling Life Form* (Figure 9) was influenced by the natural world around us. I tried to embrace the earth’s elements and represent them through color and imagery. The dark base was a mixture of ochre, cadmium red, and various shades of green that appear earthy, yet vibrant. Biomorphic shapes in Naples yellow and red were interspersed over the entire surface and visually imply the feeling of being under water. Once again, I utilized the petal image appearing as a series of intersecting circles that perfectly meet the edges of the square canvas. Radial symmetry suggests equilibrium and brings a sense of tranquility to the painting. Simplicity in rendering of the petals lent to preserving as much of the beautifully abstract ground as possible. I chose to use transparent hues and applied a thin, pin striping to imply a light source and sharp edge on the contours of the petals.

The painting, *Red Petals* (Figure 10), became an artistic experiment, in an effort to produce a work that solely relies on the petal image and variations in its size, color,
and the shift in figure-ground relationship. As I worked, I frequently referred back to the compositional success of *Buried Ornaments* (Figure 8) to guide my artistic choices in this painting. In effect, both paintings share the same color scheme, vertical composition, and stark contrast.

Like every piece of artwork, *Red Petals* has its unique stylistic attributes. With the obstructed indigo petal pattern in the background, one would have to look closely to distinguish it. The lurid middle ground becomes a trellis of sorts, covering the dark ground but allowing bits and pieces to show through. Acting as the highly decorative element of the piece, the scarlet petals enter at the bottom sprawling in various directions until they exit at the top. The graphic nature of the red petals helps them to leap from the canvas when positioned against the yellow, creating visually undulating dynamics.
Figure 10. *Red Petals*, 2009. Acrylic, Oil, and Paper on canvas. 31x63”.

The goal for my final painting of the series, *Floral Fusion* (Figure 11), was to create a synthesis that unites the geometrics of my earlier work and the organic and graceful shapes introduced with the fleur-de-lis image. I believe this goal was accomplished with *Floral Fusion*, which is a visual hybrid of vertical lines and flowing curves and makes a successful finish for my body of work.
The fleur-de-lis image appears in the middle ground centrally located down the center of the vertically placed canvas. Through positive and negative separation of the repeated image there is a strong linear element created through contrast. A distinctive addition to this piece is the extra-large hand cut stencil that covers the majority of the surface. The stencil consists of free flowing, curvilinear shapes interconnected through symmetry. It is pallid in tone and has been given a slight three-dimensional effect with a light highlight.
Figure 11. *Floral Fusion, 2009. Acrylic and Paper on canvas. 40x63”.*

The network of organic shapes would likely overpower the middle ground if it weren’t for the slight translucency of the tissue paper. To balance the composition I repeated the fleur-de-lis image in a small, concentrated, red pattern. Introduction of the red adds a crisp and radiant energy to the piece, which is a shared characteristic of the entire series. As the pattern grows from small to large, it transforms from an ordinary fleur-de-lis to a natural petal likeness, as to visually represent my artistic exploration from geometrically structured shapes to sinuous forms.
CONCLUSION

Throughout the rendering of this painting series, I believe I have successfully conveyed content through a decorative and beautiful approach. The ancient motifs and ornamentation displayed in the body of work quietly appear around us destined to be gazed upon, but ultimately to remain unexplained. Irrelevant of whether viewers recognize the ambiguous patterns, I feel the decorative aspect of my work celebrates these primitive images and speaks for individuality as an artist. Alternate interpretation is welcomed; many before us have viewed these images applied to architecture, pottery, textiles and jewelry and no culture has had the same precise understanding. The essential point is that they are highly stylized figures that have been used as ornament by almost all civilizations of the new and old world.

My in-depth studies for this project have provided me a foundation for my future artistic endeavors. Experience and growth with painting and various mixed-
media techniques will work in combination to provide me the tools to create a personal artistic and imaginative language. My intense study of Pattern and Decoration artists has heightened my appreciation and awareness for those that have stayed true to their passion for all that is decorative, even under harsh scrutiny. Exposure to these unique artists has opened an entirely new decorative chapter for me with their obscure ornament and eccentric techniques. I am thankful that this project has provided me such a valuable learning experience.
EXHIBITION STATEMENT

The paintings produced for this creative project are a blend of old and new techniques and imagery found through my experiences at Ball State University. The surfaces are a combination of paper and paint applied in a way to promote transparency and numerous color interactions. Application of stenciled paint and hand-cut paper adornments produce rich surfaces. Overlapping and shifting contrast aid in creating a visually pleasing composition through rhythm and repetition. Several influential artists have inspired my decorative ways from the Pattern and Decoration Movement of the 1970s’. Their goal as a movement was to promote ornamental design and prove its significance against the harshest of modernist critics.

My ornament of choice for my thesis was the Flower of Life symbol that was discovered by ancient philosophers and referred to as Sacred Geometry. The symbol itself is said to contain the mathematical blueprint for each of the earth’s elements; water, fire, air, earth, and ether. Each painting uses a small, basic unit of the symbol that has been repeated, transformed, or patterned in a new way to create a painting that represents a unique decorative style and artistic language.
This body of work shows my admiration for the many centuries of ornament and decoration that have embellished countless functional objects and promote the decorative arts as a means of understanding and embracing previous civilizations. As a culture, we must remember that decoration is essential to historical tradition and must not be overlooked.
WORKS CITED


