

A Child's Canvas

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Contextual Review and Concept Statement:

The Frankie Dress, an early dress design of American fashion and textile designer, Frankie Welch, was once mused as “the one dress” that had been to more White House dinners than any other. In 1964, Welch introduced her signature dress design following a simple paper-doll-like pattern that became a canvas for Welch's various textile designs (Callahan, 2022). Therefore, this design research took on a “historically informed analysis as a framework to examine studio design practice” (Parsons, 2015, p. 280-281) for the development of an engineered sublimation print on a child's sized Frankie Dress.

The concept for this design was to utilize the Frankie Dress as the canvas to experiment with various digitally created prints co-designed with children. The collaboration with children, specifically this design with one child, Mavis, allowed for the inclusion and participation of her wants and needs through her creative thought. Frankie Welch as a textile designer collaborated with her clients, as well as companies to design unique prints that were tools of branding and identity. The digital print was created from a coloring sheet abstracted from Welch's 1970 Cherry Blossom Scarf Pattern that Mavis colored, along with the writing of her name.

Aesthetic properties and visual impact:

The shape of the Frankie Dress, whether adult or child sized, is an open shaped garment with few seams allowing the garment to be a living canvas for the designer. Frankie Welch's prints were rooted in her scarf designs, which began as large-scaled, printed squares, lending itself to be transformed to a child's coloring canvas. Children are capable and creative if given the opportunity. Studies have found that children can express needs, raise issues that adults are unaware, and bring new perspectives (Xu and Izadpanahi, 2016). My experience with the collaboration was just that, a needed perspective and boost of creativity that I was lacking alone. The colors, composition, and layout were not what I would have designed without Mavis's direction and input, because it was outside what I considered “aesthetically pleasing”.

Process, technique, and execution:

Through a private collection, I had access to several Frankie Dresses and scarf prints for this historic inquiry. First, an original Frankie Dress was used to “rub off” and create a women's one size Frankie. The pattern was then scaled down to a 3T, 4T and 5T. Second, during a community activity, children had the opportunity to engage with Frankie Welch designs through various kid art activities. Next, with parent permission and approval, Mavis, 4 years old, offered her completed coloring sheet during her first design meeting.



Figure 1. Artwork coloring sheet and handwritten name by Mavis, age 4.

design meeting. During the meeting, she told me her favorite colors and shapes. She was also very excited to show me how she had learned to write her first name (Figure 1). Third, I scanned in the coloring sheet and written name into Lectra's Kaledo Print, where I experimented with various print layout – engineered, directional, and tossed, along with multiple colorways. I used a Mutoh sublimation printer to strike off options for Mavis to review. She selected the print layout, colorway, and fabrication. Finally, I printed off the approved engineered print on 100% polyester satin shown in Figure 2 and sewed the 5T Frankie Dress version. As a surprise for Mavis, I created a directional print from her handwritten name and printed on a polyester satin ribbon for the dress belt.

Cohesion:

The historic design inquiry of the Frankie Dress, digital textile design, and co-creation with children, surprisingly to the designer, was seamless. Immediately, Mavis had a vision of her dress. She was confident and articulated her preferences from our initial meeting, through design approvals, and the final garment. She did not waiver on her vision, which was remarkable experience and a potential area for future research.

Significance, rationale and contribution:

Children's clothing needs and wants have been under researched (Brun Petersen, 2021) and children neglected as a consumer as brands largely market to caregivers, specifically mothers (Huopalilinen and Satama, 2020). Clothing for children is designed and developed according to perceived needs and preferences of the child (Brun Petersen, 2021). Allowing Mavis to design her dress was a creative explosion and allowed for the child to have agency in expressing themselves through dress. Children's lives are constructed by their caregivers and social constructs outside their control. They are a hidden voice with creative ideas demanding to be heard. In the current climate of social and cultural upheaval, we as a society should break our toxic cycle of projecting our constructs onto the next generation and allow children to be the boss of their body or at least how they choose to dress. This design perspective is a new approach that is ready to be further explored.

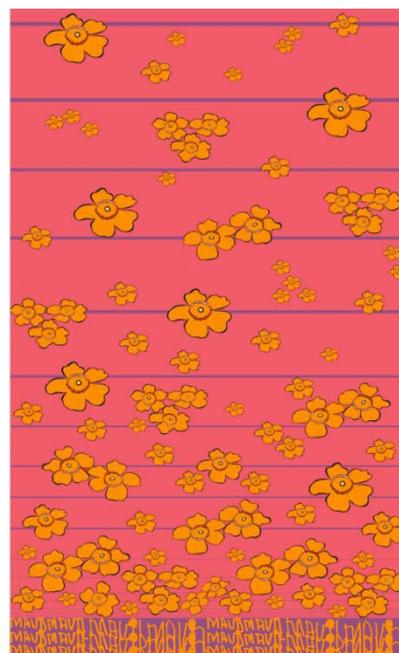


Figure 2. Final engineered CAD for dress and belt approved by Mavis.

Original and innovation:

There are several design theories centering and giving voice to the end-user, which have significantly served in designing for the needs and wants of many underserved populations in clothing. However, children and their dressing agency have for the most part been underdeveloped and a new perspective in designing. In addition, utilizing digital print design and sublimation printing allowed for fast turnaround for print strike offs and proto typing. Finally, through the historic inquiry, the Frankie Dress became a canvas for Mavis and I to explore new designs ideas.



Figure 3. Fit session with 2nd proto sample.

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