Material Movement: Interpreting Letty Esherick's Textiles Through Interdisciplinary Material Culture Research

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Keywords: Embodied aesthetics, Making-centered pedagogy, Material Culture, Textile process

Significance. This interdisciplinary case study explores the textile legacy of Letty Esherick (1889–1975) through the close analysis and reinterpretation of a handwoven wool and linen vest. As part of the 2025 Interdisciplinary Material Culture Research Cohort (IMCRC), undergraduate researchers collaborated with research faculty to investigate the garment's structure, symbolism, and potential for embodied design. Letty Esherick held a deep interest in color theory, radical body-centric movement practices such as Eurythmy, and therapeutic craft that frames this study's exploration of the vest not only as clothing but as a cultural artifact. The project demonstrates how historical garments can catalyze interdisciplinary innovation and coexistence between fields.

Context. This research is part of a larger initiative to unravel the story of the estranged wife and muse of Wharton Esherick, as an independent artist, weaver, and educator. Conducted under the tutelage of Kelly Cobb (for whom Sophia Gupman was a research assistant), as part of her 2025 artist residency at the Wharton Esherick Museum, the project seeks to amplify Letty's overlooked contributions to American craft history and material culture through archival research, creative scholarship, and public programming.

Relevant Theory or Framework and Pertinent Literature. This study is grounded in object-based and material culture research frameworks, notably Mida and Kim's The Dress Detective (2015) and Mida's (2017) articulation of the "slow approach to seeing," which emphasizes close observation and the interpretive potential of garments as cultural texts. These foundational approaches, including Bill Brown's (2001) Thing Theory and Jane Bennett's (2010) concept of vibrant matter, position objects as active agents in the cultural and emotional lives of people. To further contextualize Letty Esherick's design sensibility, the project incorporates embodied aesthetic theory, drawing from Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, particularly his belief in color as a mode of "inner resonance" with the human soul. Steiner's movement art, Eurythmy, provided a lens through which to consider the garment's dynamic relationship to body, gesture, and healing. Steiners Eurythmy influenced early Color theorists at the Bauhaus weaving workshop. Exercises developed by Paul Klee and Josef Albers—focusing on analogous hues, rhythmic form, and overlapping planes—offered a framework for interpreting the vest's asymmetrical plaid as a woven expression of equilibrium. For Albers, color carried

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not only visual weight but also emotional and spiritual impact; for Kandinsky, color was deeply synesthetic, capable of evoking sound and feeling. Students gleaned insight from reading to interpret Esherick's surprising yet harmonious use of multiple hues in non-repeating sequences. Through this layered theoretical framework, students approached the vest not only as historical apparel but as an artifact of cultural resonance—imbued with choices that reflect personal identity, emotional affect, and experimental design. These readings and philosophies collectively shaped an inquiry into how clothing communicates rhythm, balance, and human presence across time and media.

Methods/Exploration Techniques. Material Movement involved interdisciplinary,

practice-based methodologies. Creative data collection involved drawing, pattern replication, textile analysis, and imaginative responses (Chen and Lapolla, 2020). Students used sketching and gridded mapping techniques to analyze the irregular plaid structure and weave density of the hand-woven vest.

Results and Implications. Material Movement generated reconstructed pattern drafts, annotated sketches, color analyses, and interpretive prototypes that highlight the potential of garments as living texts. Student researchers reported heightened sensitivity to material nuance and a deeper understanding of how clothing acts as a conduit between personal history and cultural expression. One student noted: "The garment has a seemingly repeating pattern in one direction but not the other... it's made up of about eight colors, with the biggest stripe being three yarns long... In the other direction, there was no repeat... From a weaving standpoint, it's unclear which way is weft or warp—the fabric is a basic tabby weave, and the color pattern varies front to back." Student researchers gained insight into the observation process. Engaging with Mida's slow-looking methods, one student reported: "The articles put forth an argument that garments should be studied not just for their relevance as garments, but for their relevance to a person... Style, color, and personal reactions are all tools to justify its presence."

This blending of visual analysis, sensory perception, and theoretical reflection allowed students to integrate personal observation with scholarly critique and craft-based insights. Findings from this study suggest that Integrating material culture studies with making-centered pedagogy can promote sustainable design literacy, creating new pathways for engaging with historic and cultural textiles. This project offers a replicable learning model for educators seeking to bridge material culture theory with creative practice. By looking back through culture and history, students applying exploratory models that merge material culture and innovative practice can shape the future of fashion and textiles. The vest artifact is simple in form, however, the woven pattern is a complex interplay of form and hue. This study inspired a deeper understanding of how garments communicate through movement and color,

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acting as embodied texts that bridge art, healing, and identity. Material Movement presents a replicable model for creative research that draws on historical theory to inform sustainable, practical, and future-oriented textile innovation—advancing coexistence across disciplines and generations.

Figure 1. (a) Letty Eserick; (b) Letty Esherick vest; (c) creative process; (d) textile development; (e-g) vest re-interpretation-f, b, detail.

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