Moving the Bust Dart: Fashion Designer, Sylvia Ayton's Relationship with Pattern Cutting (SLIDE ONE) (SLIDE TWO)
Hand out paper for email addresses

This presentation is a shorter version of a paper being prepared for The Journal of Dress Historians. I was invited to write this by the editor Jennifer Daly. It explores the work and career of fashion designer, Sylvia Ayton MBE and her relationship with pattern cutting. Ayton's career is significant because of its flexibility and longevity. She worked as a designer in business partnership with Zandra Rhodes in the 1960s and as a commercial designer for a UK high-street retailer, from the 1970s to 2002. With access to her archive, the research traces Ayton's involvement with pattern cutting and considers her experiences as a designer/pattern cutter for different markets in a creative and skills based context. Within literature, pattern cutting has rarely been explored through the relationship of the designer with the craft, particularly designers such as Ayton who have worked anonymously for large companies or retailers. The underpinning research will bridge this gap by investigating the thinking, practices and paradigms of pattern cutting during a designer's career. It will also identify a lasting reference point for the fusion of technology with design, expressed in the context of fashion design careers within the global fashion industry.

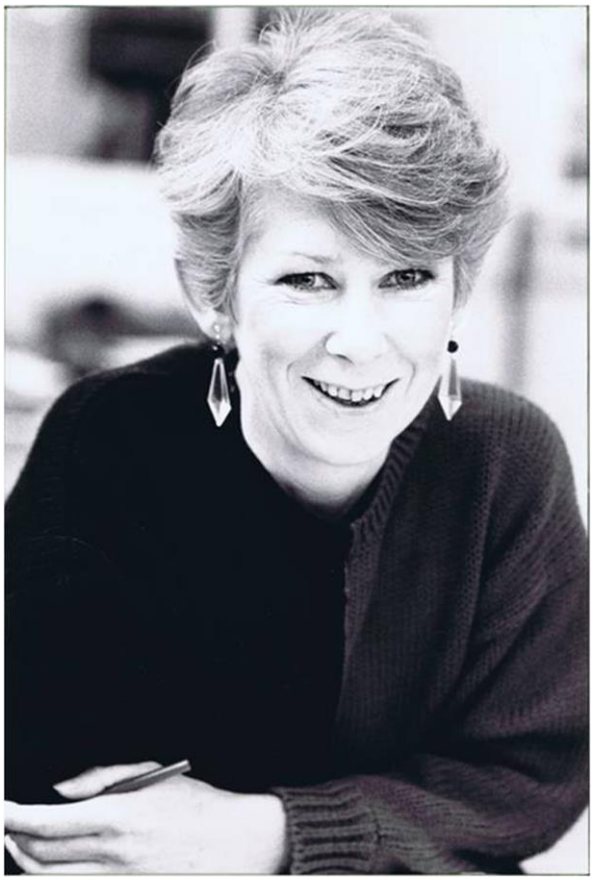

Figure: 1. Sylvia Ayton, photographed at Wallis c. 1990. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

Key Words: Pattern Cutting, Career, Craft, Designer, Technology, global, archive, practice

Ayton's archive is owned by the designer and unlike museum collections, has previously been inaccessible. It is an original body of work, that scans a 50-year career as a British fashion designer and documents many of the changes in pattern cutting that Ayton needed to adapt to. **(SLIDE THREE)**

Figure: 2. Sylvia Ayton c.1986 with her pattern cutter, fitting a coat toile at Wallis. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

Object based research permitted the close analysis of garments, patterns, press cuttings, interviews, photographs, sketches and toiles within the archive. Various conversations and unstructured interviews were held with the designer over a, number of years and revealed Ayton's passion for the practices of pattern cutting. The journalist, Tamsin Blanchard in an *Independent Magazine* article said, "Sylvia Ayton is one of the most important designers you've never heard of. For quarter of a century she has set the style of Wallis Clothes and that has meant lots to lots of women" (1995, p.53). This anonymity encapsulates the position of many designers, employed by companies and the significance of their roles and skills, to the global fashion industry often remains unrecorded.

Within literature there has been analysis of the relationships great couturieres have had with pattern cutting and how their innovations have inspired fashion. This includes designers such as Madeleine Vionnet (1876 – 1975), Christobel Balenciaga (1895 – 1972), Madame Gres (1903 – 1993), Alexander McQueen (1969 – 2010). The study explores the relationship of the working, commercial designer with the craft and provides a catalyst for exploring the thinking processes that coexist between design and cutting for designer and high street clothing. The aims of the research are to: **(SLIDE 4)**

- Document the fashion designer, Sylvia Ayton's relationship with pattern cutting using her archive as primary material.
- Consider Ayton's experience of pattern cutting as a designer for different markets assessing the merits of these roles in a creative and skills based context.
- Appraise the thinking, practices and paradigms of pattern cutting during a fashion designer's career and its value within today's global fashion industry.

Pattern Cutting: Is moving the bust dart a means to an end? (SLIDE 5)
Ayton observed, "As a designer I seem to have been involved with many aspects

of pattern cutting all my life, it is the most effective and simplest way in which to achieve your design, your creation to be worn by, you hope a thousand customers" (Ayton, 2013, p.1). Ayton explained her philosophy on cutting hinged around the moving of the bust dart. A dart is a section of fabric that is folded away to create a form fitting shape or ease within a garment (figure: 5). A bust dart often begins at the side seam of a bodice and ends near the prominence part of the bust. Ayton said, "As you draw the design, you visualize the pattern shape, you become part of the design you can feel the shape on your body, when drawn flat onto spot and cross paper and cut out, the shape suddenly becomes a three-dimensional paper garment, and then into fabric, it is a garment" (Ayton, 2013).

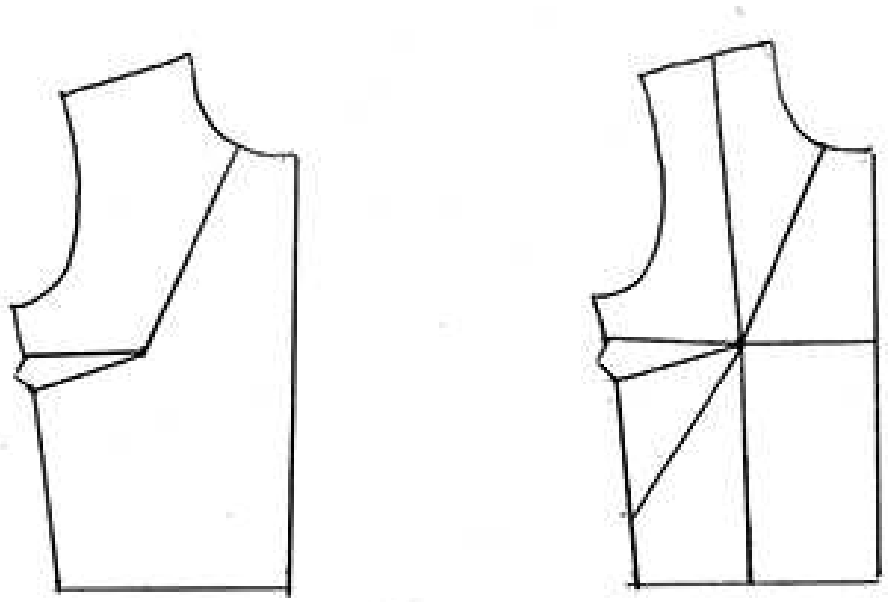

Figure: 5. The bust dart. Drawing and photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

As a child Ayton loved drawing. She remembered pattern cutting and sewing for dolls. **(SLIDE 6)** Her first encounter with moving the bust dart, was in the flat pattern cutting lessons at Walthamstow School of Art. She recalled, "All we wanted to do was draw and design so gathered around the cutting table, where a bodice block was pinned out, we stared in amazement and were told that from this simple block, by cutting and folding we would be able to move the bust dart to wherever our design directed, - Why!! Most of us were young girls who had no bust; the lesson fell onto rather fallow ground" (Almond, 2018). She was more enamoured with draping on the stand, smoothing calico onto the body form, pinning the shape and drawing the design lines over and around the bust, then taking this off the stand to reveal a three-dimensional shape. To Ayton, this seemed a more creative approach to a technical subject.

Figure: 6. Pattern for a doll's dress by Sylvia Ayton c. 1945. The tape measure indicates how small the pattern is and to note there are no bust darts. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

During her time at the RCA, Ayton advanced her knowledge of flat pattern cutting and draping. She described the flat pattern cutting lessons as awful. The lecturer talked in measurements and showed how to move the bust dart around from the bust point. Ayton observed how, "The bodice pattern was cut out in calico and pinned onto an unsuspecting student to demonstrate where the bust dart had been and where it was by pointing out the crucial bust point with a ruler or finger - I escaped from this class hid and read Vogue" (Almond, 2018). Despite these struggles, Ayton left the RCA with a set of block patterns that she felt were her friends, ready to face the challenges ahead.

1960-1969 – Pattern Cutting in the Designer Years

Ayton recalled how amazing it was to be a designer during the 1960s, discussing how she advanced from creating refined, grown up outfits to designing uncomplicated shift dresses. A feeling of simplicity emerged with an uncluttered approach to dressing combined with a desire to escape convention (Towle, 2011; Truman, 2010). This is seen in the contrasting images below. Figure is from c.1960 and shows Sylvia's elegant, printed wool mohair coat suitable for evening or theatre wear. Cut in a semi-structured way with dropped shoulders, it appears restrained and womanly. This contrasts with the outfit from c.1964. A relaxed, sleeveless, wool crepe shift, cut simply and fluidly from the fabric with no structure, it appears youthful in cut. **(SLIDE 7, SLIDE 8)**

Figure: 7. Sylvia Ayton design for a printed wool mohair coat suitable for evening or theatre wear c. 1960. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

Figure: 8. Sylvia Ayton design for a sleeveless wool crepe dress c. 1964. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

The bust dart was still pivotal to Ayton's approach to pattern cutting. As she considered grading hateful and time consuming, her designs became simpler, no darts, dresses with less but more impact. Bust darts were incorporated into soft gathers, tied at the neck. Ayton believed there were two sorts of patterns, commercial patterns used for manufacturing, easy to understand especially for the cutters and machinists - very good, grown-up patterns, but without a heart. "Then there was the pattern that you found interesting even if you hadn't seen the sketch" (Almond, 2016). Ayton considered patterns are like books, interesting to read or OK but boring. She described a pattern from the mid-1960s, **(SLIDE 9)** "Looking at this pattern it says to me this dress will sell, there is nothing much to go wrong, the tiniest bust dart is for tightening the large arm hole, than to accommodate a tiny bosom. The only problem, no centre back seam for a zip" (2013, p.7).

Figures: 9. Sylvia Ayton mid-1960s dress and pattern with bust darts. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

Textile designer, Zandra Rhodes and Ayton decided to work together creating designs that incorporated Sylvia's patterns and Rhodes' prints, **(SLIDE 10).** Fashion writer, Joel Lobenthal described, "Working with Ayton taught Rhodes the rudiments of pattern making and the two began sharing the fashion design responsibilities" (1990, p.241). Ayton described their approach, "Simple but effective, I think it worked. Interesting, wearable, wantable garments with the bust dart integrated onto the design lines" (Almond, 2018). ''We did one dress with ribbons and liked the effect so much we made seven more. Dresses with ribbons swirling from the waist…dresses with ribbons tied under the bust - all with ribbons cascading down the arms. – fashion has got ribbon taped with little pattern cutting'' (Graham, 1968, p.7).

Ayton said, "Although our innovations such as paper dresses were commercially successful the business side of the enterprise was badly run" (2003, p. 53). **(SLIDE 11)** This led to the eventual closure of the shop in 1969. "We made super garments but investment was missing. We had to go our separate ways: Zandra into a world of fantasy and me into my life as a coat designer at Wallis. It was very sad" (Ayton, 2005, p. 123).

Figure: 10. Sylvia Ayton dress with Zandra Rhodes print c.1968. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

Figure: 11. Sylvia Ayton designs from the mid 1960s. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

1969 – 2002 – Pattern Cutting in The High Street Years (SLIDE 12)

Joining Wallis in 1969, Ayton graduated to working with a team of pattern cutters. Her biggest shock was not making her own patterns. It was a very different way of working. She designed the coats, suits and raincoats and another designer did the dresses and separates. This meant two completely different ways of creating patterns, in different rooms with different equipment and different ways of thinking. As Ayton commented, “My tailors thought they

were *King* but the dress department knew they were equally creative" (Ayton, 2013, p.8). Ayton drew the design and the pattern and toile were made exactly like her drawing, therefore the drawn design had to be perfect. **(SLIDE 13)** This included correct proportions with all design details clear and precise. She reflected there needed to be perfect communication with the pattern cutter if you wanted the coat to look like your design. "My design drawings were 'working drawings with a high illustrative content'. There was no time to do a glamorous drawing, my sketch had to be glam enough to show the press and readable enough to for the pattern cutter, the machinist and Turkish factory to produce a few thousand raincoats and coats" (Almond, 2018).

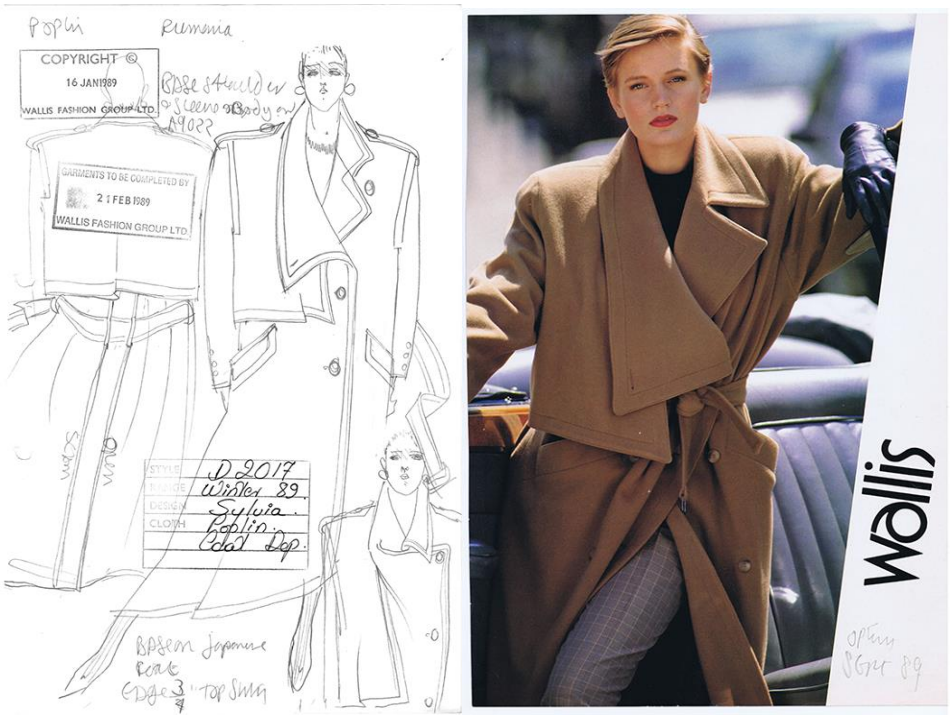

Figure: 12. Sylvia Ayton design drawing with high illustrative content and the finished coat c.1989. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton and Wallis.

In the early 1970s, Ayton described how, "She designed her own thing, then as all retailers think alike the bosses said, Hey - the shop up the road are doing this or that and we should be doing it too, we mustn't be too different". She considered the creative approach to be copying and adapting patterns from garments bought in shopping trips, as well as designing versions of what would be on trend. In the 1980s, Ayton commented, "Although it was a glamorous mix I will always remember it as a big shoulder power-dressing era'' (2006, p1). The shape of the shoulder needed to be adjusted on the pattern piece to accommodate the large sets of pads required, sometimes three at a time. **(SLIDE 14)**

Figure: 13. Wide shoulder coat design by Sylvia Ayton for Wallis, 1987. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton and Wallis.

Ayton, acknowledged her respect for the pattern cutters she worked with. As outerwear designer at Wallis, her role was advisory. The team were concerned that her sketches were interpreted into patterns and toiles, accurately therefore sketches needed be distinct and easy to understand. Ayton said, "Design presentation is only a means of communication ... drawing is very important, it is the start of a long line of communication..." At the range meeting the pattern cutters were keen to ensure any adjustments that needed to be made to patterns were minimal. The sample machinists worked with the pattern cutters to make up the toiles and the first samples. Once passed, patterns were made up as final samples and sent on to the factories to produce the garments (Sinha, 2000, p.230).

Ayton felt new ideas emerged from various sources and often inspired by shapes within pattern cutting. She recalled the T-shape that evolved from a square shape, which formed one pattern piece. This inspired her to buy a sample garment in 1985 that resembled the T-shape, with no bust dart and make it into a coat. **(SLIDE 15)** She also looked at other shapes inspired by the square such as the knitted coats constructed from one piece of material by Issey Miyake. This led to her experiments with circular shapes based on an ethnic cape in figures. These ideas were turned into raincoats for the Wallis customer in the late 1980s **(SLIDE 16)**

Figure: 14. T shape sample and coat design 1985. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton and Wallis.

Figure:15. Experiments with circular shapes. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

When computers moved into the pattern room in the late 1990s, Ayton was devastated however her pattern cutters soon adapted. She noted, “The sensitive line they drew to shape a collar had gone, it was now a series of steps; pixels. I was no longer able to correct a shape on the pattern because it was on the computer and no space on the table to draw and explain my alteration because the table was full of the computer” (Almond, 2016). During the early 2000’s minimalism began to influence mainstream fashion. Ayton said, ‘’I tried to introduce the simplicity of the beautiful cutting of the French designer Andre

Courreges (1923 – 2016). But no, it was a great idea and a way to use beautiful, expensive fabrics frugally but my customer couldn't cope she liked a bit of shush'' (2013, p.14). The Wallis style, ''Was achieved through Sylvia's sketches and the Wallis block patterns. She endeavoured to design glamorous and expensive-looking coats with a generous cut, whatever the season demands were in terms of styling'' (2000, p.256). To go from the voluminous cutting **(SLIDE 17)** to the restrained cut in **(SLIDE 17)**, was not the design journey Ayton wanted to travel and after 30 years of making thousands of Wallis customers happy with her designs, she retired.

Figure:16. From voluminous cutting to restrained minimalism. Photographs courtesy of Sylvia Ayton.

What can be learnt from Sylvia Ayton's Approach to Pattern Cutting

Sylvia Ayton's pattern cutting journey, covered many styles of garments. She believes pattern making is a creative activity and a means to an end. It is a continuation of drawing and seeing the drawing come to life. She said, ''For me it was the simplest, easiest and most effective way in which to achieve my dream design for my ideal customer. My drawn designs achieved what I wanted. I wanted the drawing to look good, the pattern to look good, if it was near perfect and pleasing to my eyes the customer would also find it pleasing to her eyes.'' (2013, p.14). As Sylvia's designs were line drawings, comprehensive enough for pattern cutters to work with , she observed that, ''Details such as stitching, pockets, collar and cuffs were clarified through in-depth drawing or written notes by the side of sketches. Knowledge of pattern cutting helped to ensure that designs could be made up commercially for appropriate prices''.

The study has considered the thinking, practices and paradigms of pattern cutting during Sylvia Ayton's extensive career. It has identified key skills Ayton acquired throughout her pattern cutting journey. These include; **(SLIDE 18)**

- The ability to draw as a vital aspect of both design and pattern cutting - **DRAWING**
- Pattern making is a continuation of the drawing skill – seeing the drawing come to life - **CREATIVITY**

- The design sketch needs to be readable enough to for the pattern cutter, the machinist and the factory to produce the garment – **TECHNICAL SKILLS**
- Respect and admiration for the role of the pattern cutter - **RESPECT**
- The creative approach being a merger of design and pattern cutting skills – to be seen as one holistic set of skills – **MERGING OF SKILLS**
- Excellent communication with the pattern cutter to ensure the finished garment looks like the design. - **COMMUNICATION**
- Communication and commitment to deadlines - **DEADLINES**
- Commitment to work – **WORK-ETHIC**

(SLIDE 19)

A fitting tribute to Ayton's relationship with pattern cutting throughout her career could be assessed in the final words from her presentation at The First International Symposium for Creative Pattern Cutting (2013). "She put the garment on she knew she looked good, she felt great, she was confident and she had the cheque book. Through pattern cutting I had achieved what I wanted. Just Beautiful. Creative pattern cutting (2013, p.14)

(SLIDE 20)