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Transforming Thai cultural art features into modern product design

Jong Boonpracha

Department of Industrial Design, Faculty of Industrial Technology, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Dusit, Bangkok 10300, Thailand

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Abstract

Cultural product design is one of the processes that revisits local wisdoms' values by improving and applying that local wisdom to the present conditions. This paper aimed (1) to apply the meaning of cultural objects from Rattanakosin Island, the center of arts and culture in Bangkok, Thailand, and (2) to extract outstanding cultural art features and show how traditional cultural meaning can be transformed into modern products in line with the current product usage patterns. The study proposes a four-stage approach for transforming Thai cultural art features into modern product design: (1) Identification stage; (2) Translation stag; (3) Development stage; and (4) Implementation stage. The study's particular cultural art features were a pair of giant sculptures at the temple gate. The result shows that the cultural art features can be transformed into a pair of house gate lamps with a modern form but still conveying the cultural art feature identities.

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Introduction

Culture always plays a role in designing a unique product (Srivorapoj, 2010). Designers must correctly understand the underlying cultural roots before using them to create different works so as to convey cultural stories accurately, practically, and effectively (Kaewthep, 1999). Culture is concerned with a collective consciousness that includes beliefs, morals, traditions, and behaviors in the form of human expressions, or it may relate to improved social changes built for prosperity, demonstrating how the public has learned from the old, illustrating a succession to each other as a tradition (Sianglai, 2009).

Presently, designing products initiates bringing more cultural elements into the design inspiration to create a unique identity for a product or merchandise (Pongpibool, 2007). Developing culture into modern products tends to be a design trend in the worldwide market (Morris, 2018). Discernibly, designers need a better comprehension of cross-cultural communications to participate in the global market and develop local community product design. As cross-cultural matters become significant for product design in the worldwide economy, the correlation of design and culture becomes a critical point, making local community product design and the global market worthy of further in-depth study (Lin, 2007). Thus, this study aimed to demonstrate how to apply cultural objects' meaning and transform it into modern products according to the present product usage patterns.

E-mail address: jong.bo@ssru.ac.th.

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Literature Review

Thai Identity and Design

Using regional identities as a way of design inspiration, the "value" of design can be realized in product design (Gaver, 2001). Nowadays, consumers expect a new experience from using the product in the field of utility and aesthetics of the design (Brown, 2009). It is a challenge for designers to consider creating value for a product in the design that responds to consumer demand trends, emphasizing the needs of usability, versatility, and appearance (Julier, 2000). Thai identity used to create value for design work has been divided into three major groups (Leesuwan, 2010).

1. Local wisdom refers to the background of knowledge and ability and the intelligence of inhabitants gained from their learning experiences in nature. The natural environment adjusts to enable a consistent and appropriate way of life consisting of environmental resource use, handicrafts, Thai traditional medicine, religion, and agricultural traditions.

2. Arts and culture refer to three cultural aspects: visual arts, literary, and performing arts: (1) The visual arts consist of architecture, paintings, and sculptures; (2) The literature consists of fiction and poetry; and (3) The performing art consists of dance, film, theatre, and music.

3. Community and society ways refer to social practices, rituals, and festivals of people in the community that have been inherited until they lead to a peaceful society, the demonstration of which defines the community.

Culture and Product Design

The interrelation between product design and culture has been passed over time as design is considered a reflection and representative of change (Inkong, 2017). Previous studies noticed that variations in the culture's adaptation reflect and define evolution in the product design. The product design transforms and simultaneously shapes culture (Chen, 2018). For instance, cultural beliefs and local practices create and advocate frames of meaning that impose a product's means of cultural context. Such cultural framings influence whether people use a specific product (Gaver, 2001).

Moreover, culture provides product meaning, leads to rituals within which objects are used, and displays values frequently echoed in the form and function of things (Chaichan, 2013). Thus, the design is connected to culture through the association of cultural values in products. However, presenting Thai identity to reflect "value" in various products and building designs is offered at three levels.

1. Level 1 Being original is to use traditional values showing in design without modifications or alterations.

2. Level 2 Blending original is to use the values that have existed in the original but modified and developed to create a new design while retaining the original values.

3. Level 3 Being novel is to adopt traditional values in the dimensions of wisdom, ideas, techniques, and processes to create new designs or new products.

The above three levels show how to transform cultural products from the surface to the spirit. Schemes of level 1 and level 2 help designers create new visual styles for their works, while level 3 offers an opportunity to discover innovative products. Transforming cultural features into products in level 1 is easy to develop, and almost all designers can imitate this scheme. However, turning level 1 to level 2 or level 3 requires more radical innovation that opens a new market and meets unique customer needs (Chen, 2018).

Methodology

Product design or creation of work that involves cultural matters is set in a framework of creativity, both cultural and design aspects, so that the creative process is carried out according to the work's objectives (Rodgers & Milton, 2011). Lin (2007) presented a conceptual approach to the concept of cultural creativity. This framework of creativity against product design is in four stages, as follows:

Identification Stage

This step is to search for critical cultural features in local traditional arts that can represent cultural art features transformed into modern product design. The study explored twelve temples in Rattanakosin Island with three aspects of art and culture: architecture, sculpture, and painting, and data were collected using photographs. Then, a single selective analysis of art and culture features was conducted to be a study model.

Translation Stage

When the cultural features of the objects were analyzed and selected, the next step was to find the meaning, importance, and origins of the model of culture art from multiple sources. The study was conducted using observation techniques, pictures, and various secondary

sources such as books, literature, and the internet. In this stage, the study analyzed the object's cultural feature meaning to determine the critical cultural art features applied to reflect into the product.

Development Stage

This stage is the conceptual development and design realization stage. The study used drawing sketches and sketched into the images of cultural art features to create conceptual development. This stage aimed to develop an idea sketch in text and pictograph form based on the translation stage using sketching techniques. The drawing is a translation of the concept into a sketch to make it concrete, making it easy to understand, discuss, evaluate, and communicate.

Implementation Stage

At this point, the cultural product can be seen in the actual shape in the form of a model such as a sketch model, mock-up, appearance model, and test rig to examine usability, ergonomics, proportion, and form of the concept. The study conducted a 1: 1 scale model that could show the product's usability obtained from the development stage. Room walls were used as a scene to perform experiments of light and shadow produced by the luminaire. Finally, a 3D image showing the result of transforming cultural art features into modern product design was simulated.

Results

Four stages of the cultural product design were used to create a cultural product, namely, identification (setting a scenario), translation (telling a story), development (writing a script), and implementation (designing a product). The four steps of transforming cultural art objects' features into the cultural product are described as follows:

Investigation/Setting a Scenario

Based on Thai identity and design, the study and self-survey, the topic of arts and culture was selected to be explored in Rattanakosin Island. It was found that Rattanakosin Island has various exotic forms of arts and culture, such as architecture, painting, and sculpture. The study analyzed a pair of giant sculptures in front of a temple entrance as a model or inspiration for transforming cultural art into product design, as shown in Figure 1.

Translation/Telling a Story

From the self-survey observation and points of view of the various sources, it can be concluded that the meaning of the giant sculpture in front of the temple gate has three meanings: meaning according to beliefs, general meaning, and meaning according to Buddhism.

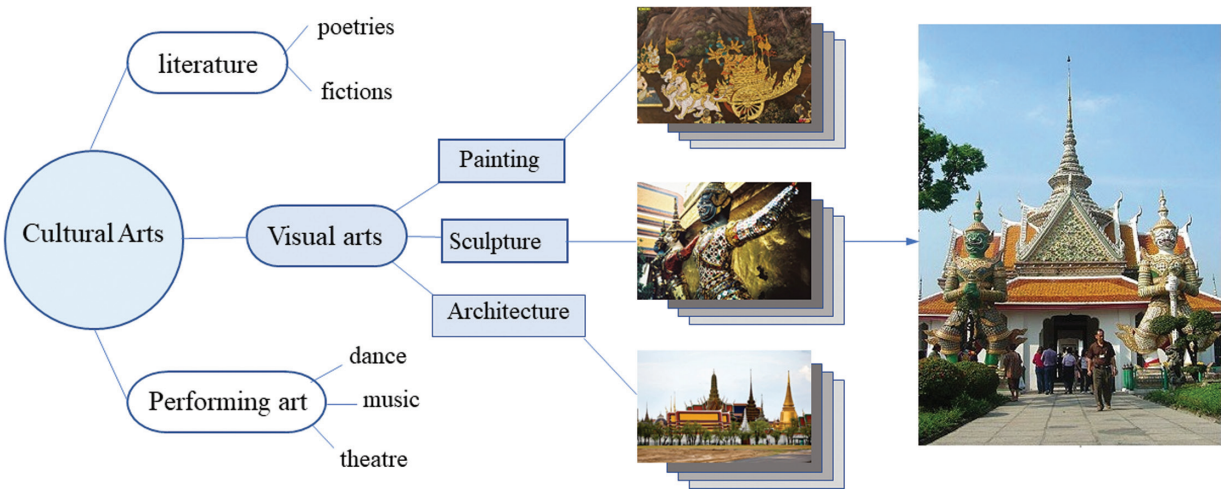


Figure 1 The selection of a pair of giant sculptures in front of a temple entrance as a model or inspiration for transforming cultural art into product design

1. Meaning according to belief: The giant sculpture has appeared for a long time. However, it is assumed that it recently became prominentas art in temples in the early Rattanakosin period. The giants guarding with their baton are said to act to help protect and dispel evil spirits, and in this way, protect Buddhism. The image of a giant is usually terrifying, but it is created with the imagination of Thai artisans. Thai artistry has an outstanding and majestic beauty, and when entering the temple, one can experience the Spirit in Thai Art.

2. General meaning: From researching the image that has the characteristics of standing guarding, it was found that the style of the standing guard is similar in many places worldwide throughout history to the present day. These guards are usually standing in essential areas such as palaces and famous buildings.

3. Meaning according to Buddhism: The function of these giant sculptures is to guard the gates according to belief, to protect, heal, and exorcise ghosts. This can correlate to mindfulness and meditation practices adapted from the prosperity of the Buddhist Anapanasati by watching and being aware of the truthful touch of what appears to be independent of the things that affect the mind. Those who have practiced well can prevent the suffering from greed, anger, and lust, which makes humans miserable.

From the meaning according to Buddhism, mindfulness can be linked to intellectual brightness, that can be represented in products about brightness; that is, a functional lamp is an illumination and intellect that allows people to see things clearly, preventing accidents. This is illustrated in Figure 2. Lighting also provides a more secure feeling when there is enough light on the road and in different places at night (Saribut, 2007).

The giant sculpture's location in front of the temple can be linked with the lamp's function in front of the house gate, as shown in Figure 3.

Development/Writing a Script

From the meaning of the giant sculpture in front of the temple at the gate based on translation/telling a story, the function of protection in three different meanings has led to the product design of the front gate lamp, as shown in Figure 4–5.

Implementation/Designing a Product

This step developed the idea sketch of development/writing a script to make a prototype model and experiment with light and shadow to ascertain its potential as shown in Figure 6–7.

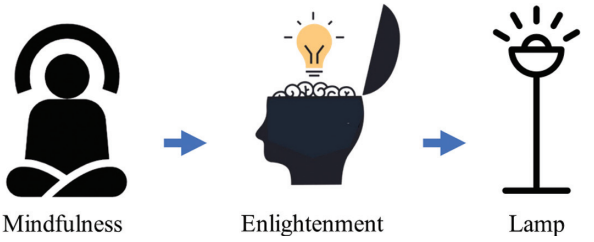


Figure 2 Guard in the meaning according to Buddhism can be linked and related to the product



Figure 3 Coherent positioning between the giant sculpture and front door lamps

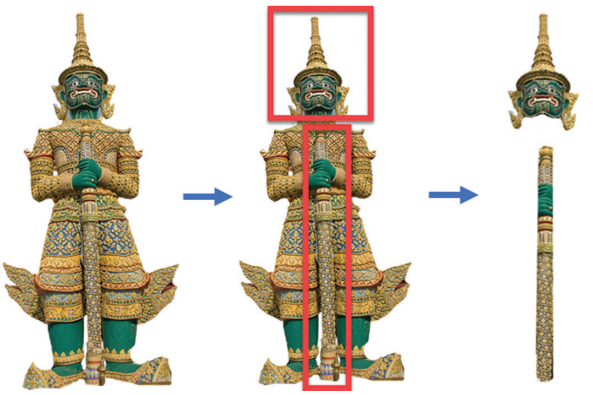


Figure 4 Reduction of cultural art object feature but still with original identity



Figure 5 Transformation of the cultural art object feature to product design



Figure 6 Prototype model and experiment with light and shadow



Figure 7 Application of the prototype model

Discussion

Protection is the keyword in terms of meanings and stories regarding cultural art objects in this study which can be converted into product design. Three approaches were used in meaning according to belief, general meaning, and meaning according to Buddhism. Meaning interpretation of each approach can lead to a different product. According to Feng Shui science's view (Srivorapoj, 2010), if choosing the meaning according to beliefs, a product could be a statue in front of the entrance. If selecting a general meaning, a product could be a police baton or an emergency lightbox. For this study, meaning according to Buddhism, the product is a pair of front gate lamps at the house entrance. The corresponding meaning is light in Buddhism, guarding against suffering from entering the human mind. The brightness of the product prevents a thief from entering the house. In front of the house entrance, the lamp's position corresponded to the giant sculpture's place to guard the left and right temple gate.

Transforming cultural art objects has to be minimized to be compatible with modern products, but even so, this can still convey the cultural art object's identity. This study reduced the appearance of a giant guarding the temple entrance to only its mace and head. However, just these two parts can still portray the cultural art object's identity as long as there is consistency of shape and meaning.

The study's four-step approach can provide a guideline for examining how designers communicate cultures and interpret features of cultural art meaning into the design process. In this study, the four-step method correlates the aspects of the product design process as presented by Middleton (2005); the Identification stage related to Design inspiration, the Translation stage related to Design concept, the Development stage related to Idea development, and the Implementation stage related to Final design.

After the study results, another optional idea was formulated to transform cultural art features. In addition to using the whole appearance, interpretation of cultural art objects can also use only certain parts. For example, in the case of this study, from a giant sculpture guarding the temple gate, a specific feature that represents its identity can be selected, such as a giant fang, which can be linked to Dacula using his fangs to suck blood in the neck. This connection is possible because of the word fang itself. The next process was to find a link to the product used on the neck, which could be a neck pillow used to support the head in the position of lying to sitting, as shown in Figure 8.

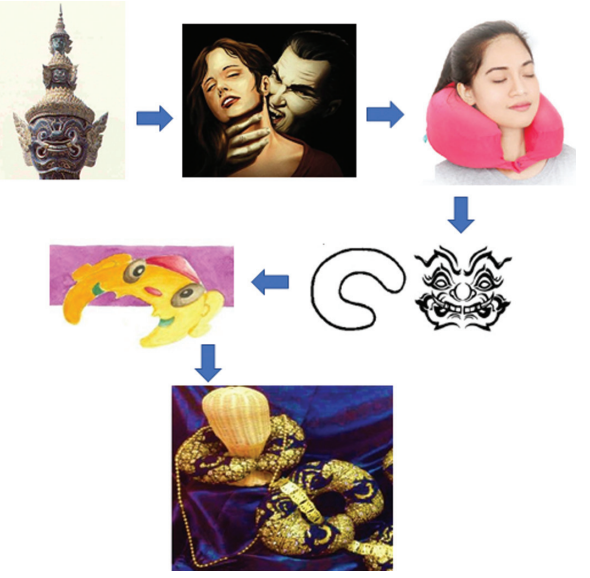


Figure 8 Transformation of giant fangs into a neck pillow

The design process also reduces the appearances of a giant guarding the temple entrance to just a giant's mace and its head. This is transformation by miniaturization, which has the purpose of fitting the giant sculpture onto the front door. This miniaturization process contrasts with Transformers, a Hollywood movie, which transforms a car's small scale into the enormous size of a robot, as illustrated in Figure 9.

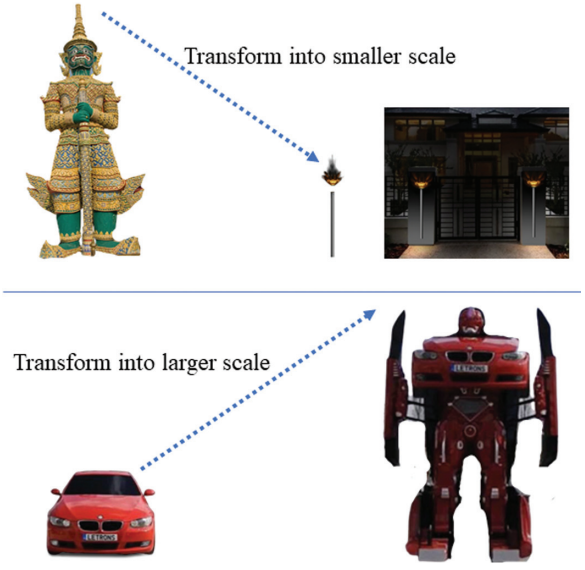


Figure 9 Comparison of transforming into contrast scale

Conclusion

It is well known that the aesthetic of Thai cultural art features substantiates an excellent potential for intensifying modern products' design value. With their gorgeous visual features, Thai cultural art features offer great potential for enhancing design value and becoming acknowledged in the worldwide market (Julanual, 2016). Evidence represents that the perspective of Thai cultural art features will unquestionably become a pivotal cultural element in future design applications (Chaichan, 2013). Accordingly, a cultural product design model was proposed for transforming Thai cultural art features into modern product design. The Giant sculpture-derived products provide unique examples of applying cultural art features to design while remaining cultural identities. The study presented how the distinguishing features of Giant sculpture can be transformed into a modern product design that can be desireable to the current market. Consequently, cultural products can broaden the heritage and traditional values of Thai cultural art features to the consumer and enhance the perception of being Thai cultural identities through modern product design.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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