



Design and Craftsmanship: Insights from the “Born in Thailand Project”

Mattia Bonavolontà

Uttaradit Rajabhat University, Mueang Uttaradit, Uttaradit, Thailand

E-mail: mattia@manossusias.com

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Abstract

This article examines the "Born in Thailand Project," focusing on the collaboration between modern design and traditional Thai craftsmanship. It highlights the project's journey, spearheaded by Monica Marconi Martinez and Mattia Bonavolontà, and its exploration into ceramics, textiles, and jewellery in Sukhothai province. The paper discusses the methodology of hands-on engagement with artisans and the iterative development of products, reflecting on the unique challenges and innovations of each craft. Key outcomes, like the Thai Puan Mini Loom and Thai Puan Creative Hub, illustrate the successful amalgamation of traditional techniques with contemporary design. The project showcases the potential of such collaborations in revitalizing traditional crafts and adapting them to modern markets, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity and sustainable design practices.

Keywords: Collaboration, Traditional Craftsmanship, Contemporary Design, Cultural Sensitivity, Innovation

Introduction

This paper explores the intricate synergy between contemporary design and traditional craftsmanship within the context of the "Born in Thailand Project." This unique initiative, a collaborative effort spearheaded by Colombian designer Monica Marconi Martinez and Italian designer Mattia Bonavolontà, embarked on a 9-month journey of cultural and creative fusion with Thai artisans during almost all the 2018. It reflects on the profound impact of integrating modern design principles with the age-old techniques of Thai craftsmanship, exemplifying how such collaborations can rejuvenate traditional arts while adhering to contemporary design aesthetics. The project, spanning various regions of Sukhothai province, ventured into an array of crafts including ceramics, textiles, and jewellery, each presenting its own set of challenges and innovations. This study delves deep into how these collaborations transcended cultural boundaries, fostering a unique dialogue between modernity and tradition, paving the way for new interpretations of Thai artisanal heritage in the global design landscape.



Figure 1 Mattia Bonavolontà working on the loom chair prototype with the local carpenter



Figure 2 Sukhothai Map of the artisans' workshop location
1: USA Sangkhalok, 2: Suntree, and 3: Mai Ngern

Methods and Materials

The "Born in Thailand Project" methodology was comprehensive and dynamic, tailored to adapt to the unique characteristics of each craft. The processes of the project were iterative and involved several key stages:

1. **Research and Understanding:**
The initial stage involved an in-depth exploration of the local crafts, history, and traditions. This phase was crucial for gaining insights into the artistic and cultural contexts of the crafts.
2. **Hands-on Engagement and Skill Development:**
The designers immersed themselves in the actual craft techniques, working alongside the artisans. This hands-on approach was vital for understanding the nuances of each craft and for fostering a genuine connection with the artisans.
3. **Conceptual Development:**
In this phase, ideas were brainstormed and conceptualized, considering insights gained from previous stages. This involved a creative synthesis of traditional techniques with contemporary design principles.
4. **Product Development and Prototyping:**
The team engaged in the iterative development of product prototypes, integrating feedback from artisans and refining designs to align with both aesthetic and practical considerations.
5. **Finalization and Optimization:**
The final stage involved refining the prototypes, ensuring that they met the desired standards of quality and design. This stage was crucial for achieving a balance between artistic integrity and commercial viability.

Throughout the project, there was a continuous exchange of ideas and techniques between the designers and artisans, creating a rich environment for innovation and co-creation. The methodology was applied across different craft forms, including ceramics, textiles, and jewellery, each with its own set of challenges and opportunities.

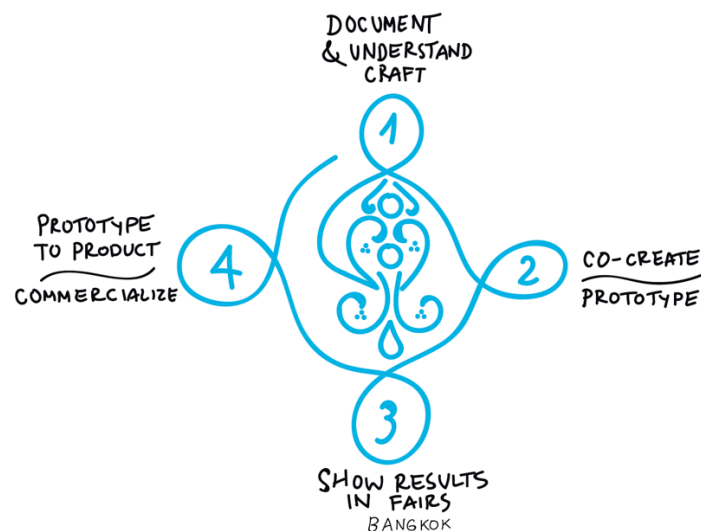


Figure 3 Method scheme used with each craft workshop during the project

Results

Key outcomes include innovative product lines like the Thai Puan Mini Loom and the Thai Puan Creative Hub. These results exemplify the successful amalgamation of traditional techniques with contemporary design, yielding culturally significant and commercially viable products.



Figure 4 Monica Marconi Martines presenting new Suntree Concepts

Each collaboration offered unique insights:

1. Ceramics Collaboration with Usa Sangkhalok:

Focused on modernizing traditional Sangkhalok ceramics. The team faced challenges in engaging artisans with new concepts and experienced slow prototyping. They created innovative designs like modular lamps and lotus-themed bathroom ceramics, reflecting the local environment and culture.

- **Pros:** Innovative product designs, like modular lamps.
- **Cons:** Resistance to new ideas; health concerns.
- **Artisan Feedback:** Appreciation for new design perspectives, but initial hesitancy in adapting to new techniques.

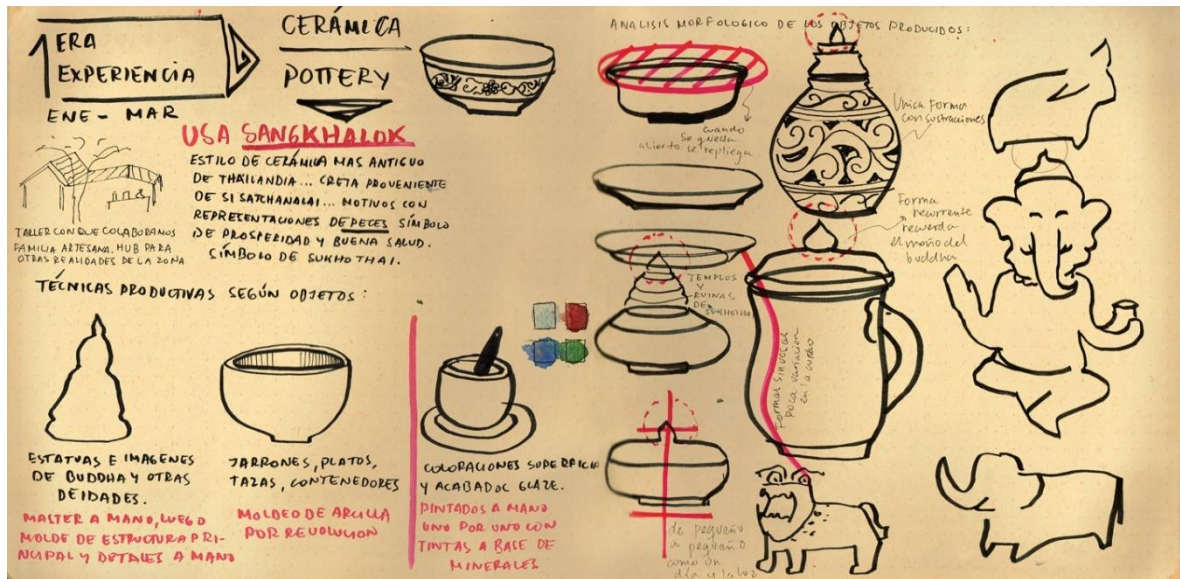


Figure 5 Sangkhalok preliminary study scheme from our diary

2. Textile Collaboration with Suntree Weaving Center:

This collaboration successfully integrated traditional Thai Puan fabrics into contemporary furniture and home decor, like the Loom Armchair and Threads Lamp. The project's success was largely due to the committed team at Suntree and their openness to innovation.

- **Pros:** Successful fusion of Thai Puan fabrics in modern design.
- **Cons:** Balancing innovation while preserving traditional essence.
- **Artisan Feedback:** Positive response to the innovative use of fabrics, enhancing market appeal.

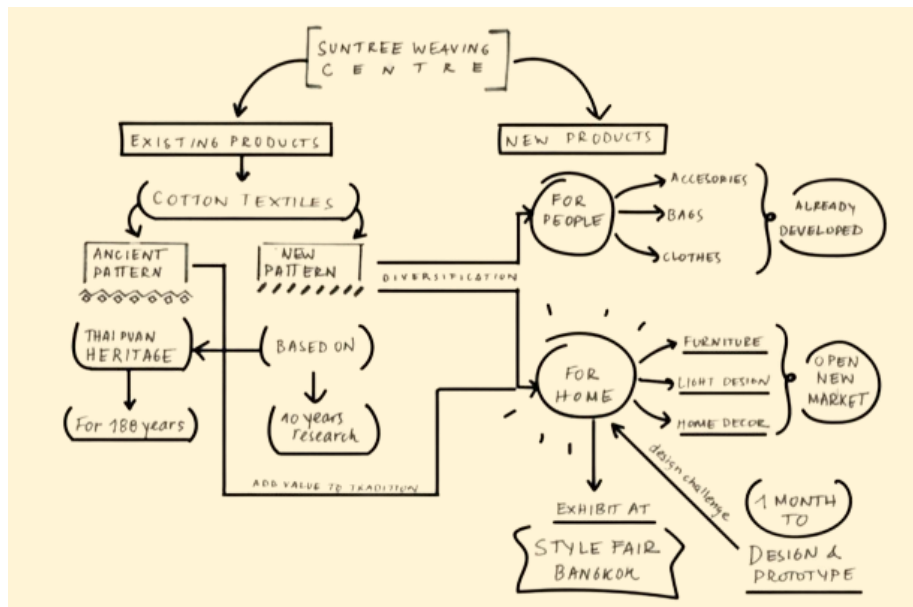


Figure 6 Suntree developed a map and study scheme from our diary



Figure 7 Loom chair final prototype with rug prototypes underneath

3. Jewellery Collaboration with Mai Ngern Silver Jewellery:

Focused on creating contemporary jewellery designs with traditional techniques. This collaboration, though challenging due to language barriers and the team's unfamiliarity with jewellery design, resulted in unique creations inspired by local nature and culture, like the Sukhothai rice & fish and Banana jewellery collections.

- **Pros:** Unique jewellery designs appealing to a broader audience.
- **Cons:** Language barriers; unfamiliarity with specific craft nuances.
- **Artisan Feedback:** Enthusiasm for new design ideas, though challenges in communication and design execution were noted.

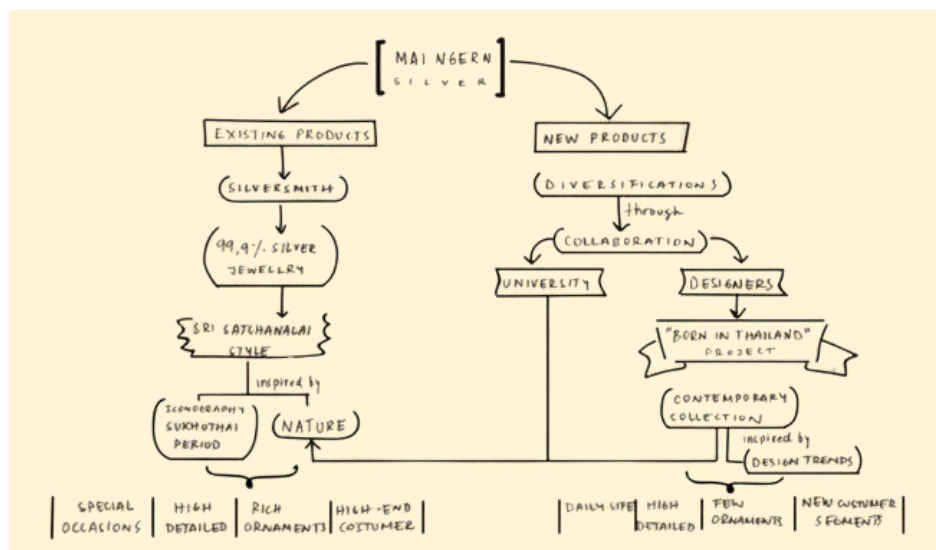


Figure 8 Jewellery preliminary study scheme from our diary



Figure 9 Prototype Rice Field Pendant (Left) Prototype Rice Filed Cycle Pendant (Right)

Discussion

Each collaboration highlights the importance of understanding and respecting cultural heritage while introducing contemporary concepts. Challenges like language barriers, resistance to change, and balancing innovation with tradition were significant. Yet, the project demonstrated that such collaborations could lead to innovative and culturally significant products, bridging the gap between old and new. The success of this initiative serves as a testament to the potential of collaborative efforts in revitalizing traditional crafts with modern characteristics.

The project's challenges and successes reflect theories and findings in the fields of cross-cultural collaboration and design innovation. For instance, Krippendorff's (2006) theory of product semantics aligns with the project's focus on integrating cultural meaning into design. The dynamics of cross-cultural collaboration, explored by a study by Hall (1976) of high-context and low-context cultures, shed light on the challenges of communication faced. Further, Manzini's (2015) work on sustainable design reflects the commitment of the project to preserving traditional crafts through modern design. These references provide a theoretical framework to understand and analyse project outcomes.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The project underscores the potential for harmonious collaboration between modern design and traditional craftsmanship. It suggests that future endeavours should focus on the respectful integration of contemporary design with artisanal heritage. This approach can aid in preserving cultural practices while evolving them to suit modern aesthetics and functionalities. By fostering such collaborations, there's an opportunity to create a sustainable, culturally resilient future for craftsmanship, as advocated in studies by Krippendorff and Manzini on design innovation and sustainability. The outcomes of the project reinforce these theories, demonstrating the practical feasibility and benefits of such integrative efforts.



In conclusion, the "Born in Thailand Project" illustrates the rich potential of blending traditional craftsmanship with modern design. It suggests that future projects should place a strong emphasis on cultural sensitivity, embrace ecological sustainability, and foster open dialogue for continuous learning and adaptation. These strategies are crucial for maintaining the integrity and relevance of traditional arts in the contemporary design landscape. This approach not only preserves heritage; it also enhances unique identities with appropriate innovation towards sustainability in the contemporary world.

Acknowledgements

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