

Thai Mudmee Design and Development for Contemporary Use

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***Abstract** This research study investigates the cultural significance and meaning of Thai Mudmee, their historical content, and the variety of the Thai Mudmee techniques, including patterns, symbol and colours. The aim has been to develop the traditional pattern and designs of the Thai Mudmee and produce contemporary textile pieces more appropriate for modern lifestyle tastes both in Thailand and Internationally. By reviving the Thai weaving tradition it is also hoped to encourage and maintain the continuous survival of tradition Mudmee, providing new sales opportunities and markets both in Thailand and abroad. Studying various attempts to redevelop traditional crafts in different countries brought to me the idea of how to develop folk crafts, the problems that occur in this area have encouraged me to express how folk crafts could be benefit from the design process. In this thesis I also express my recommendations for other researchers and the Thai government, as well as other people who interested in Mudmee design. The thesis concludes with the possibilities of how to improve the design of the Mudmee fabric and further areas of research.*

Key words

Introduction

Mudmee is a form of traditional craft weaving unique to Thailand that is currently in decline. It has been the aim of this research to develop the design of Thai Mudmee for the contemporary world and to preserve this variety of textile folk art by expanding upon aspects of its design, including its patterns, motifs, materials and processes. While various attempts have been made to preserve Mudmee in its traditional form and have failed to halt its general decline. By introducing a new strategy of design research and development it is hoped to revitalise Mudmee and give it new currency as a textile product.

Research methodology

My research was undertaken both in the UK and in Thailand, my research was broken down into four distinct parts. **Part one : Preparatory studies. 12 Months**

Which include.

- Literature search and review.
- Definition of the problem.
- Identify, adopt and adapt visual example.
- Creative design development

Part two : Research in Thailand 6 Months

Which include

- Interview Thai weavers.
- Research in Thai textile museum.
- Research activities of Department of Thai Export and conduct interview.
- Practice the Mudmee technique.
- Consultations with contemporary designers.
- Visits to other contemporary designers using Mudmee.
- Produce new sample designs.

Part three : Production of New Weaves and Exhibition 18 Months.

Which include

- Main weave production
- Preparation for/undertake exhibition.
- To coincide with
- Part four : Final Editing of Written Work 12 Months.
- Collate and edit Mudmee research.
- Critical evaluation of the practice element of the research, including final exhibition.
- Complete Thesis

Research Overview**This Frame**

CODE	DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES	Year		
		2001	2002	2003
PART 1: In UK				
1.1	-Literature search and review	■		
1.2	-Definition the problem		■	
1.3	-Adopt visual example			■
1.4	-Design and creative development			■

1.5	-Exhibition preparation																																					
PART 2: In Thailand																																						
2.1	-Interview Thai weavers																																					
2.2	-Research Department of Export																																					
2.3	-Research in Thai Museum																																					
2.4	-Practical Mudmee technique																																					
2.5	-Literature review continued																																					
2.6	-Produce the sampling																																					
Part 3: In UK																																						
3.1	-Analyse the sampling																																					
3.2	-Produce the weaving																																					
3.3	-Exhibition																																					
Part 4: In UK																																						
4.1	-The final editing of written work																																					

This research has sought to develop traditional Mudmee design to meet the demands of the current market in Thailand as well as in foreign markets. Originally Mudmee was designed for use as a woman’s tube skirt. I therefore designed new Mudmee patterns for use in many items such as, clothing, upholstery fabrics, curtains and so on. The designs were obtained by combining old traditional designs with the modern design process. Chemical dyes and different fibers were also introduced in to the Mudmee technique. A survey of textile designer’s gave me an idea of the demand in the Western market for new types of Mudmee.

The aims of the research have been :

- To investigate the cultural significance and meaning of Thai Mudmee.
- To study the historical content and the variety of the Thai Mudmee technique, including its patterns, symbols and colours.
- To develop the traditional ideas and designs of Thai Mudmee and produce contemporary textile pieces.

Particular aims of the practical component of the research were that new types of Mudmee textile products should be created. Also that design should increase the perceived and monetary value of Mudmee products. The practice-based methods used have been:

- Modern design process and techniques were applied to the traditional Mudmee process.
- Special attention was paid to the respective uses and benefits of natural and chemical dyes.
- Traditional designs were simplified.

- The current preference of village weavers for lurid or obvious colour (a result of the simple use of synthetic dyes) was abandoned.
- New textural effects have been introduced.
- New designs have been produced and promoted through exhibitions.

The theory component of the research has focused on increasing the author's knowledge of Mudmee and the context of its production. It has also underpinned the practice-based component of the research. This has involved the identification and/or review of practical problems and issues including:

- Sourcing traditional designs and techniques suitable for modernization.
- Issues concerning the introduction of modern design processes.

Design Concepts

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to express my idea for developing the original Mudmee patterns for contemporary designs. The design was based on the use of the Thai traditional Mudmee motifs. I have also given a brief introduction of the traditional Mudmee pattern which has been applied on women's pha sin (tube skirt) for example: patterns from the environment, patterns from plants, patterns from religion and ceremonial occasions, geometric patterns and miscellaneous sources. My designs use a basic design method which is used in the process of sketching designs. The work of contemporary designers and the artists in developed countries are sources of inspiration for my designs.

Mudmee pattern

Traditionally the special design patterns of Mudmee belonged to the nobility, some patterns were created for use in festivals or ceremonial occasions and the simple patterns were for use in every day life. However in the present time designs have changed with new influences and environment as well as the advanced technology available for example chemical dyes are imported and the modern loom was introduced. Traditional Thai textiles tend to organize designs in strong horizontal or vertical bands and lack borders particularly lateral borders, this technique is used for making women's tube skirt (pha sin), traditionally it was never used to make cloth for the upper body. In the present time however it has been transformed into many items such as men's shirts, women's dresses and home decoration.

The pha sin for young women tends to be bright and brilliant in colour and design. The older women's pha sin becomes darker and less colorful. The designs on the older women's pha sin have simple designs and have smaller motifs combined with vertical stripes on the pattern. The designs and patterns of Mudmee pha sin is divided in two types.

- For ceremonial purposes in which the silk is woven in colourful designs and has a complex pattern.

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- For household use in which it is basically cotton woven in simple designs with vertical stripes and horizontal stripes.

Mudmee has many classifications and types of patterns. Each pattern has its own meaning and style. The natural environment around the village is the main inspiration for Mudmee pattern. The patterns can be divided as follows.

Patterns from the environment such as sky, river, and water.

The environments around the villages have inspired the weavers greatly. Their environment can be compared to their library. For example the river, most of the weavers are farmers therefore water is the most important factor in their agriculture. Insufficient water could affect their farms. The weaver expresses their feelings and translates them into their weaving. One of the basic water patterns is 'Pha Lai Nam Lai' (running water) which has been used in four parts of Thailand.

Another example is the stars. (Fig 3.4, Fig 3.5) Each season the stars have a different pattern such as, in the summer, the sky is very clear, therefore the weaver weaves stars in many different shapes from their imagination, for example a star in the wasp's nest shape, stars around the moon, a star in the flower and lotus shape.

Pattern from trees, plants and flowers

Flowers and trees are a great inspiration for the weaver. (Fig 3.6) Most of them are the plants around the villages such as Bamboo trees, tanjong pigun, (Fig 3.7) jasmine mali, water lily, water clover puk vann, orange jasmine kaew. Each tree has its own unique look. For example Casuarinas tree (Ton Son Tree) is the most favourite tree for floral patterns. The Ton Son tree has special and beautiful leaves and also the Ton Son tree is the symbol of fertility for the farmer. Furthermore the leaves of the Ton Son Trees are used for decoration.

The Bamboo Tree is one of the important trees for the villager. It is used to build a house, furniture and home accessories as well as some of its parts being used for cooking.

Animals pattern

Many kinds of animal have been used for their form and colour for making the Mudmee Pattern, for example birds, butterflies, elephants, bugs, buffaloes, cows, snakes etc

Description of Mudmee technique

Mudmee is divided in to three processes:

1. Pattern in the warp yarn

Pattern in the warp could be created in many ways such as by using different colour stripes or

the design can come from the resist-dyed warp yarns.

2. Pattern in the weft Yarn

the designs come from the resist-dyed weft yarns. The pattern happens after being woven in basic plain weave.

3. Pattern in weft and warp yarn (called double Ikat)

Both the warp and weft threads are tied and dyed separately in one or more colours or in various colour along its length. The design then takes shape on both sides of the fabric after the weaving process. However Mudmee concentrates mostly on the weft dimension more than the warp dimension, and has foundation structures of plain weave which are the same as those used in making Japanese Kasuri.

Mudmee process

Two types of Mudmee are those woven with natural silk thread and those with artificial thread. The artificial thread can be bought from the local market. The good quality silk thread costs about one thousand two hundred baht (twenty pounds sterling) per kilogram.

The natural silk after the reeling process, which produces the silk thread, is called raw silk. Raw silk has a yellow color. The weaver usually washes the raw silk with alkali before beginning the typing process. Sometimes the cleaning process will be done after the first typing color. In the traditional way the weaver uses substances such as a cabbage, banana roots or leaves, or young palm sprigs, by slitting them in to small pieces then leaving until dry and burning them until they become ashes. The next step is stirring the ashes with hot water and letting the sediments sink. Then the silk threads are put into the solution until it bleaches out the yellow color. Finally the silk is washed with cool water and left until dry under the sun. Next is the preparation of the weft threads for the typing process. First reeling the silk on to small bobbins then measuring the weft threads. The winding frame (Fig 4.13) is used for measuring the weft thread. The winding frame basically is made from steel. The yarns are wound in a frame set on a swivel and are turned with a crank.

Threads are wound onto a frame in a pair, as a result each time winding gets four yarns, by two yarns at the front and two yarns on the back of the frame. Mudmee uses four yarns in one pattern (a pattern of four yarns is call Lam in Thai). For example if the design needs twenty pairs of weft yarns the weaver will needs twenty different Lam. After the winding process the weft yarns are transferred to the typing frame (called Mudmee frame made of either wood or steel). Weft Mudmee has more alternatives of yarn because the yarns are not placed under tension. The size and texture of yarn has an effect on the design result. Next the silk threads are tied at intervals with strings, (Fig 4.14) (the old traditional string is made of banana leaves however in the present time it has been replaced by nylon string) to form a pattern, which is designed. This step is referred to as 'Mudmee'. In the final step of the Mudmee process the warp threads are transferred onto the loom. The weaver needs to calculate the length and width of the warp threads before stringing the loom. Then the warp thread is threaded

through the heddle. The heddles are suspended from the loom by cord attached to pulleys.

Most of my design work has pattern on the weft, not a warp pattern or double Mudmee, as I believe that most of the Mudmee fabric in Thailand has the pattern on the weft, therefore Thai weavers are familiar with this process as well. The process is not as complicated as double Mudmee even though most of double Mudmee in Thailand employs a simple abstract pattern on the warp yarn. My intention has been to design the Mudmee by using only a few colours, producing simple designs, as a result the weavers could produce more fabric and the price is not as high as double Mudmee, therefore the customer could afford to buy the product. After I completed the fieldwork, thirty designs were woven into Mudmee fabric. The weavers in three places translated the fabric: Amnachreoun District, Chonabot District and Bann Pai District. Most of the fabric exploited silk threads with a few experiments in cotton and artificial silk thread.

After a period of design practice, I then made the selection of the designs to translate into the Mudmee technique. The process of translation has been done in Thailand. I also made a survey of contemporary Mudmee in Thailand. In fact there are only a few Mudmee designers in Thailand who are in control of the design process because most of the Mudmee fabric is produced and designed by the weavers themselves.

Design Content

I started my design research by studying the traditional Mudmee patterns by looking at the original cloth, contemporary textiles and documentary pictures. I have found some very useful research called Folk textile patterns and colours and Thai folk textile research (which was produce by the researcher of Silpakorn University) both research works contained useful information about the original Mudmee pattern designs.

I intend to improve the design of the original Mudmee to be suitable for contemporary use, as I believe that the original Mudmee contains a lot of folk traditions the same as ikat in many other countries. As Battenfield said

“Design and Patterns in historical ikat were controlled by cultural attitudes, legends, myths, and rituals” (Battenfield, 1978, p.24)

The development of my designs has been refined from these concerns:

1. Traditional Thai Mudmee.
2. Modernist design concepts.
2. Design from contemporary designers and artists.

I prefer to make a design on paper, the same method as has traditionally used to create basic designs

“The traditional design method is to draw, and to redraw successive alternations, either on different parts of a large piece of paper or else on a series of tracings from the original sketch layout.” (Jones, 1992, pp.22-23)

As I believed that

“The process of design by drawing can be seen as an accelerated version of craft evolution, with the freedom to change several parts at once rather one at a time.” (ibid)

In contrast

“Craftsmen do not, and often cannot, draw their works and neither can they give adequate reason for the decision they take.” (Jones, 1992, p.19.)

Most of my design work is based on basic geometric shapes such as the diamond shape, the triangle, the scale, the square and the ogee as I believed that geometric forms, as a basic design, as Regensteiner mentions

“Geometric designs are applied by every artist in endless combinations, Lines define spaces and lead the eye to points of interest, intricate geometric compositions evolve from squares, rectangles, circles, triangles and hexagons” (Regensteiner, 1986, p.13)

Delaunay also makes impressive use of geometric form as she expresses the use of her geometric form in the following way :

“These simple and manageable elements seem suitable to the distribution of colour, and it is the relationships between colours that make up the real object of our studies.” (Damase. J., 1991, p.58)

Example of Design

I was inspired by the idea of the construction of the mobile and the combination of different shapes of each fish. The groups of fish are a combination of a mother fish and baby fish. I liked the idea of a construction using a variety of shapes. I then carried on with the idea and began working on the mobile theme. I began to research about mobile design, I found out about the work of Alexander Calder, a sculptor his work has been an inspiration in my design (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1.
Alexander's mobile

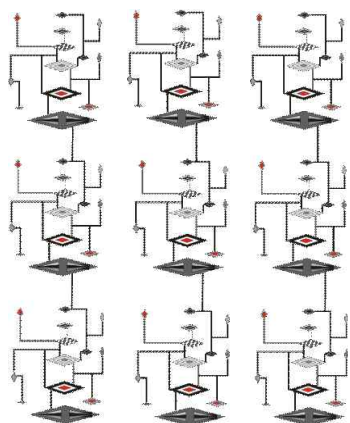


Fig. 2.
Mudmee pattern inspiration from
Alexander's mobile with white
background

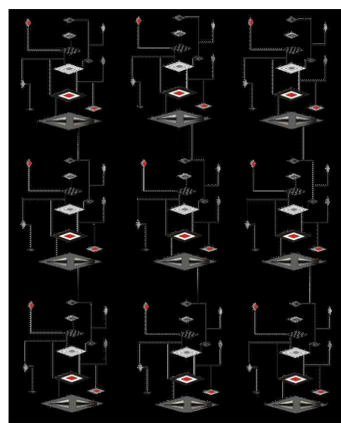


Fig. 3.
Mudmee pattern inspiration from
Alexander's mobile with black
background

Alexander Calder earned his reputation from circus performances, wire sculptures, and early mobiles. His kinetic motion mobile work gave me a lot of inspiration.

Example of New Mudmee Translation

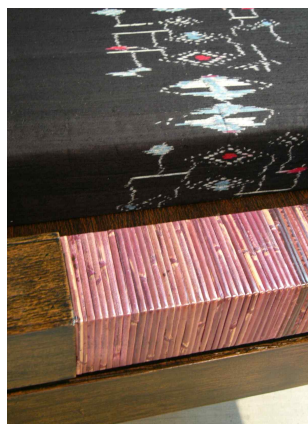


Fig. 4.
Mudmee fabric in spiration from
Alexander's

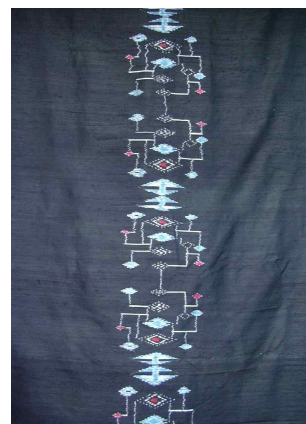


Fig. 5.
Mudmee pattern inspiration from
Alexander's mobile

Conclusion

In my research method I attempted to use things that weavers were familiar with. One reason that I based my design on tradition pattern was to save time. I want my textiles to be used widely, so they need to be able to produced easily by local weavers. Totally new motifs would be too difficult for them. My designs are close to theNorthern Thai Mudmee weaving method, which applied the design on the weft threads only. For my designs I have used the traditional motif reducing or increasing the size of the motif as well as rearranging the position of the shape. The combination between thebackground and foreground was very important as well as the motifs. Asthe weavers do not have the design knowl- edge I had to instruct them slowly and carefully so that they could understand the process. For ex- ample I allowed them the time to experiment with dying colour and introducing very simple colour theory. Communication between us were important. I treated them as if they werw teaching me and so we respected each other.

For my pilot test, instead of having a ques- tionnaire, I selected a group of people and showed them the fabri. A questionnaire would not have been possible as in order to responds to my question, each fabricto a selected group, for exam- ple to the designer groups as well as housewife. Due to I have many designers friend, such as in- terior designer, graphic designer, fashion designers and it was quite straightforward to ask for their opinion. The most important thing was I would be giving an honest opinion from them Iam quite confident that they like the fabric because they want to purchased them. I also showed the fabric to other groups from different careers such as bank officers or housewives. I have received good feedback from those guys as they order the fabric from me as well turn them into the garmentI feel very please that they like the design as well as it was good for the weavers as they could have more customers.

After my fieldwork, I found out that, it was only possible to develop designs in some weavers



Fig. 6. Mudmee pattern inspiration From the diamond shape in To the garment

groups because of many reasons such as, the age of the weavers in the group, the available time they could provide. However the result from the completion, the promotion from the newspapers and the quality of my design could inspire other weavers groups in Thailand.

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