

Traditional Knowledge Principles of Thai Fruit and Vegetable Carving

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Abstract

This qualitative investigation uses a participatory research method to document the traditional knowledge and state of fruit and vegetable carving in Thailand. Results show that successfully inherited traditional carving designs are simple and easy to learn. More intricate designs live and die as the artistic signature of the individual artisan and are not usually inherited. The intricacy of the displays will reflect the level and prestige of the events at which they are shown, which are primarily hotel banquets and contests. All modern fruit and vegetable carved displays are based on traditionally inherited principles. There are problems with the traditional craft in six major categories: materials, designers, sculptors, design development, inheritance and added-value creation. Ultimately it is important for all artisans to be well-trained in the traditional concepts of the art but creative and pragmatic in their design concepts.

Keywords: fruit, vegetable, carving, food art, Thailand

1. Introduction

The traditional knowledge of Thai food decoration is an area of national culture that should be developed in line with modern society. Fruit and vegetable carving is a national heritage that has been passed from generation to generation for hundreds of years (Paitaiyawat, 1995). In fact, there is no evidence to say when the craft first began, although it can be traced to the early Sukhothai Kingdom (1238-1438) (Hongwiwat, 2003). In the past, fruit and vegetable carving was used when offering food to monks and elders. The pumpkin was one of the first vegetables used for carving and it was decorated with flowers for ceremonial presentation. From these origins, the craft developed and more fruit and vegetables were used to decorate ceremonial locations. Fruit and vegetable carving was incorporated into the Thai secondary-level curriculum in 1934 by Ajarn Yeuan Panutat and has been a part of adolescent studies since (Jantanapalin, 2003).

Nowadays, fruit and vegetable carving is more developed and complex. There are courses in sculpting from secondary to higher level education and fruit and vegetable carving is considered a profession. The growth of the tourist industry has seen a growth in competition among hotels. The top-end hotels seek to gain an advantage over their rivals and employ fruit and vegetable carvers to provide special decorations for their banqueting halls and dinner plates. This gives them a competitive edge and showcases Thai heritage to visiting tourists (Hongwiwat, 2003). National carving contests are also periodically held to showcase the talent of the sculptors. However, due to the competitive nature of the craft, there is a lack of any systematic compilation of traditional knowledge surrounding the carving principles and techniques. Additionally, given the international popularity of Thai food and the increasing homogenization of global society, it is possible that in the near future Thai food and Thai culture will become disassociated. By incorporating fruit and vegetable carving into the presentation of Thai cuisine, the traditional identity of Thai culture is retained. This is also a way to add both cultural and economic value to Thai food. For these reasons, the research team undertook this investigation to document the principles and traditional knowledge behind fruit and vegetable carving in Thailand, identify problems with the handicraft and suggest solutions to ensure its continuation and inheritance by future generations.

2. Methodology

This is a qualitative investigation that utilized a participatory research method to examine the traditional knowledge of Thai fruit and vegetable carving. The research period was from April 2009 to April 2010. The

research area was purposively selected as Bangkok Municipality because it is the capital city of Thailand, the heart of trade, business and tourism and the centre of fruit and vegetable carving knowledge. The research sample of 150 people was divided into three groups. Group one, key informants, consisted of ten government education, tourism and diplomatic experts and twenty private sector tourism experts. Group two, casual informants, consisted of thirty teachers and thirty individuals working in the fruit and vegetable carving industry. Group three, general informants, consisted of thirty tourists and thirty banquet guests.

The investigation utilized data from documentary research and field study. Field data collection was conducted using four methods: participant observation, interview, focus group discussion and workshop. Structured interviews were held with all groups. The interviews consisted of three parts. Part one asked for personal information of the respondent and general information about the interview. Part two asked for information related to the principles of fruit and vegetable carving and the development of display designs. Part three asked for suggestions to create a management model for fruit and vegetable carving at national banquets. Non-structured interviews were held with all groups to supplement the information gathered in the structured interviews. The content of non-structured interviews primarily concerned patterns and display design forms. During participant observation, the research team recorded data in seven categories: materials, designs, sculptors, design development, inheritance, added-value creation and management. Focus group discussions were used to outline a management model for fruit and vegetable carving, which was concluded during a workshop. The seven points of the management model were management form, location, materials, designs, sculptors, added-value creation and management at banquets.

Data collection was carried out in four stages: on-site validation, recording, classification and validation of content. Data validation was conducted using four methods of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation. Typological analysis was then carried out according to the aims of the research: to identify the traditional principles behind fruit and vegetable carving and to outline a model for the management of fruit and vegetable carving based on problems with traditional knowledge use. The results are presented here as a descriptive analysis.

3. Results

3.1 *Traditional Principles of Fruit and Vegetable Carving*

The founding design principle for fruit and vegetable carving was the lotus flower (Figure 1). It is associated with the exotic and has a pleasant fragrance. Moreover, the lotus carries social significance and value because it is used as an offering in Buddhist worship. The lotus flower has been the inspiration for many Thai works of art because its straight lines can overlap in any number of ways to create a simple, yet aesthetically pleasing final form. As sculptors became more adventurous, confident and skilled, the closed lotus shape was opened and adapted to be more intricate and different natural inspirations were used, such as leaves, flowers and animals (Figure 2). There were three principal development directions: using naturally occurring shapes, historical inspirations and geometric forms (Rodbun, 1975).

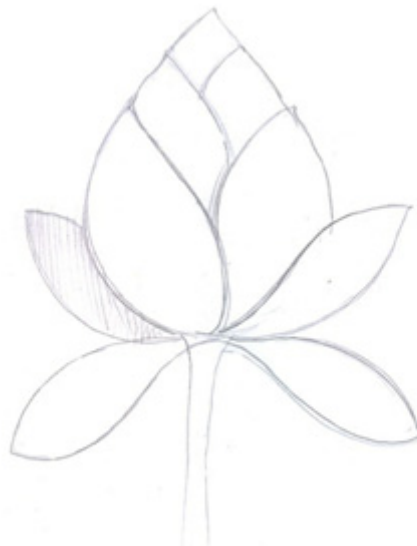


Figure 1. Traditional lotus leaf carving design

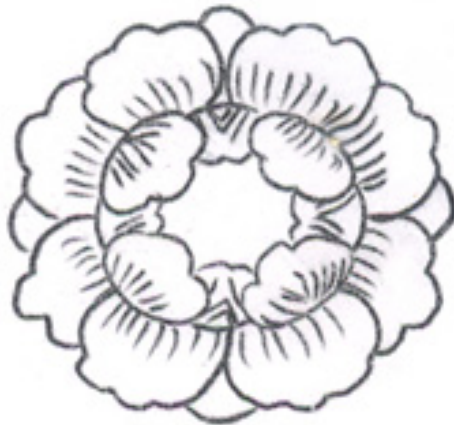


Figure 2. Design based on the form of the *Hibiscus mutabilis*

Sculpting patterns and techniques can be mixed and combined as much as the sculptor deems necessary. This is how the patterns develop and each expert artisan makes his artistic mark on the display. It is important that artisans remain flexible. 'Some events do not require over-elaborate carvings because the emphasis is on speed, although the quality must remain high.' (Danoi S, personal communication, 2010). For these events, it is extremely important to choose the correct carving designs, which is when the sculptors' knowledge and experience prove invaluable. (Mukura W, personal communication, 2010) Some designs are therefore too intricate and confusing. The easiest designs are the ones that will be inherited from one generation to the next because they are the most useful and can be used on dinner plates (Figure 3). Although the basic principles of each design come from observations in nature, they are adapted to reflect local beliefs, customs and commission specifications. It is this last factor that has become increasingly important in sculpting for banquets because the artisan must use the practical purpose of the carvings to select the design. If the sculptors do not develop their designs constantly, they will not be offered work. At the same time, they must not forget the traditional knowledge in design creation because these are the principles that all sculptures are based on.



Figure 3. Fruit and vegetable carvings used on dinner plates

3.2 Traditional Table Displays

Not all carvings are created for the plate; sculpted displays are made to decorate tables and dining rooms too. There are three standard, traditional table displays that have been used throughout the history of fruit and vegetable carving in Thailand (Figure 4). In the past, carvings were not extravagant and were easy to create. The emphasis was on beauty and fresh colours; it was not popular to make high-level artistically detailed sculptures. A small number of important and durable Thai flowers were added to the displays. ‘In the early table designs, artists started to use banana leaf art.’ (Sittitrai, n.d.). The materials were arranged in groups by colour tone and were well spread out. Only a few fruits and vegetables were used in the display because diners considered it a waste to throw away good, edible produce. For this reason, artists created designs that could be eaten and table sculptures were limited to the most important tables (Jongjit, 2007). Gradually, the art became more developed and the artists experimented with levels. Models were incorporated into the displays to create a complete picture and western styles became more influential (Buapan & Kornsinisit, 2009).

Table displays used today are variants of the original designs (Figure 5). They are often stronger in their depiction of Thai identity and heritage, with elephants and Thai flowers prominent themes, yet contain elements of international design (Sawangasuk P, personal communication, 2010). The fresh materials are usually grouped together by type. Boats are often heavily featured in the displays because they are easy to design with, are part of Thai identity and refer to the everyday life and history of Thai people. Despite the boldness of the displays, there are delicate carvings throughout. The styles have become more daring and intricate because the displays are now judged as part of a competition, whereas before they were merely for show. Now the displays must be fashioned according to the specifications and demands of the particular competition or event. The modern displays are intended to reveal the relationship between humanity, nature and the universe (Rodbun, 1975). Despite the developments, ‘the majority of designers prefer to stay true to traditional methods and styles with only slight modifications and modernizations. This is because the original designs are a) our heritage and b) simplistic perfection.’ (Lazaribis A, personal communication, 2010).

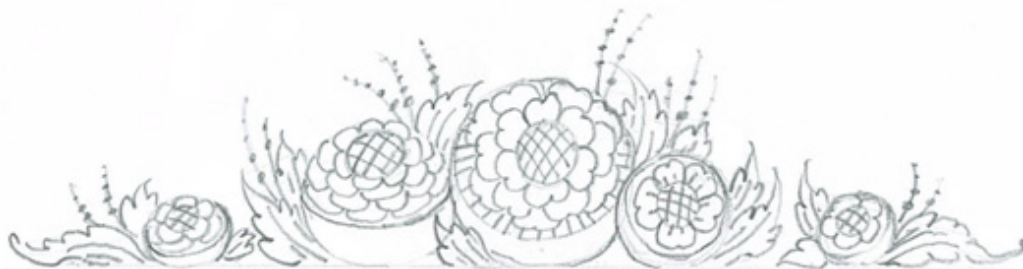


Figure 4. Traditional fruit and vegetable table display designs



Figure 5. Modern fruit and vegetable table display designs

There are now four categories of table design: natural, original, geometric and abstract. The category chosen will depend on the event, concept of the designer and materials available. If the event is a particularly grand and important ceremonial occasion, the displays must reflect this. Figure 6 is an example of modern table display interpretations incorporating traditional principles, contemporary developments and Thai identity.



Figure 6. Modern fruit and vegetable table displays

3.3 Problems with Contemporary Fruit and Vegetable Carving in Thailand

Despite the developments in traditional fruit and vegetable carving in Thailand, there are a number of problems. These problems are illustrated in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1. Problems with fruit and vegetable carving in Thailand

Problem Category	Detail
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The large events take too long to prepare for, so the fruits and vegetables used develop an unpleasant odour by the end of the carving process. • Fruits and vegetables are not fresh, affecting the display life of the sculptures. • It is difficult to find fruit and vegetables with appropriate properties and quality. • The most suitable fruits and vegetables are not always in season.
Designers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designers do not have sculpting knowledge, causing conflicts between the designers and sculptors. • Designers do not design based on real objects.
Sculptors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sculptors lack expertise and are unable to create delicate carvings. • Sculptors cannot design. • Sculptors are difficult to find, so quickly organised events are difficult to achieve.
Design development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developers lack knowledge in adaptation. • Names of new designs are not appropriate. • Developments do not consider the objectives of the event. • There is a lack of support for modern developments, especially among traditional teachers. • Designers do not communicate with sculptors, so do not know the sculptors' needs. • Designs and placements are not compatible. • Designs are developed too much and lack beauty.
Inheritance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers instruct in basic principles rather than technique variety. • People lose interest in the craft because it is time-consuming. • The craft is viewed by outsiders as a pointless, time-consuming and eccentric hobby rather than an important part of national culture. • Young people see conservation as the responsibility of the older generations. • There is very little electronic information available. • There are no demonstrative exhibitions.
Value creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign tourists are willing to pay extra for the art but some groups of Thai people see the additional cost as an unnecessary expense. • Some people view the value of the sculpted work the same as an ordinary fruit or vegetable. • The value is limited to Thai cuisine because foreign cuisine has its own decoration style. • The products cannot command a high price and the creation period is lengthy. • The worth of the art is dependent upon the mentality of the viewer. • The contests are expensive to enter.

3.4 Management Model of Fruit and Vegetable Carving for National Banquets Using Traditional Knowledge

From observation, interviews and focus group discussions a seven-point management model for fruit and vegetable carving was determined to combat problems with the craft. The categories in the model are management form, location, materials, designs, sculptors, added-value creation and management at banquets. The content of the model will now be summarized.

The form of arrangement should be in the form of a boat, literary construct, natural phenomenon or physical representation of Thai identity and must integrate traditional knowledge and modern techniques. The displays should be shown in a traditional Thai-style building or an important place associated with Thai identity. The target group observing the displays must be tourists, philosophers and creative thinkers with a variety of occupational backgrounds, as well as important media personnel to disseminate public information. Traditional basic designs are most appropriate for the displays, such as the *Alpinia galangal* and *Oxalis purpurea* flowers, rice ears, rose buds and blossoms, dahlias (*Dahlia*), buttercups (*Ranunculaceae*) and white champaca (*Magnolia × alba*). Materials for carving must be selected according to the location of the event and the season because certain fruits and vegetables will spoil quickly if not carefully chosen. Good examples of suitable fruits and vegetables are watermelon, cantaloupe, beetroot, taro, pumpkin, carrot, mango and papaya but they should be appropriate for the design and the length of time required. Artisans should be well-trained but creative and pragmatic in their design concepts.

4. Discussion

New developments to traditional fruit and vegetable carving displays must be made continually. If the artisans do not develop, their work may disappear. However, at the same time, the original knowledge and traditional designs must not be lost. It is important that these fundamental principles are incorporated into every work of art. Although the inherited traditions are basic, sculpted displays at the national level and for important ceremonies must be intricately developed and meticulously planned to achieve appropriate levels of beauty and detail, while maintaining Thai identity (Tongyaem N, personal communication, 2010). It is necessary for the artisans to continually practice their handicraft and develop an original and unique artistic signature to impress and amaze observers. If the designers and sculptors can achieve this, they may increase the public interest in traditional fruit and vegetable sculpting. 'It is extremely important that the designers consider modern preferences. Then they will be able to take traditional knowledge into the next generation.' (Lazaribis A, personal communication, 2010).

In this research, six categories of problems were identified: materials, designers, sculptors, design development, inheritance and value creation. In response to the problems found, the research team makes the following suggestions (Table 2).

Table 2. Suggestions for fruit and vegetable carving in Thailand

Problem Category	Suggestions
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colourful containers and banana-leaf art should be used to supplement the displays. • Seasonal fruit and vegetables must be used in the display, even if they were not part of the original design. • Materials selected for use must be appropriate for the event and have the correct dimensions. • Sculptors should choose and buy the materials themselves.
Designers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designers must communicate with sculptors during the design process. • Designs must accurately reflect nature.
Sculptors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sculptors must train regularly and consistently. • Sculptors must continually develop their handicraft style. • Sculptors must actively study throughout their career. • Sculptors must combine traditional knowledge and modern innovations. • Sculptors must be creative and model their work to fit the occasion.

Design development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designs should incorporate traditional Thai <i>kranok</i>, <i>krueatao</i> and <i>pum thep phanom</i> patterns to emphasise the expertise of the sculptor and traditional Thai heritage. • Thai identity must be a major part of the design so that the work and the event are recognised for their importance by guests. • Designs must be developed to be more beautiful and appropriate for the event. • The designer must understand the components of the design and how they are used. • New designs must combine traditional knowledge and new features. • Designers and sculptors must communicate on the detail of the designs. • The designs must be based on nature. • The designs must incorporate a mixture of sizes. There should also be big, bold uses of colour and finely detailed carvings.
Inheritance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers must be sincere and genuinely love their art. • The government and ministry of culture should establish study of the craft among young people in such a way that stirs pride in Thai cultural heritage. • At events, officials must be designated to maintain and take care of table sculptures. • Fruit and vegetable carving demonstrations should be organised to teach young people the steps and stages of the handicraft. • Teachers must teach design concepts and sculpting techniques, encouraging students to innovate new designs based on traditional knowledge. • Related organisations should support and sponsor the inheritance of traditional knowledge.
Value creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modern media must be used to advertise and promote traditional fruit and vegetable sculpting. • People must be made aware that this is a handicraft that can promote Thai culture and identity across the world. • Designs must be created that are easy to make, small and require only a few sculptors. This will temporarily remedy a shortage of skilled artisans. • Fruit and vegetable sculpting must be promoted as a profession rather than a hobby to encourage young people to pursue their interest. • Fruit and vegetable carving must be used more frequently at events across the country and abroad.

5. Conclusion

To maximize the effect of traditional knowledge in Thai fruit and vegetable carving, seasonal, colourful and suitable materials must be chosen for inclusion in the displays. Artisans, both designers and sculptors, must continually develop their artistic signature to remain modern. All designs must be based on the simple and efficient traditional knowledge passed from generation to generation. At an institutional level, fruit and vegetable carving must be promoted as an important part of Thai cultural heritage and a viable vehicle for the preservation of Thai identity worldwide.

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