Decoding Narratives of Copper Craft Products through a Narrative Interview Approach

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Abstract

The narrative is a term found in philosophy, psychology, and humanity studies. Various product design studies have recently looked at narratives to enrich the design process by creating an engaging experience. The narrative is said to be a natural way of experiencing the stories and establishing the emotional connection in the evolution of humankind. Craft is such an area where we have been hearing the stories from ancestors that are connected to the products and the techniques of making. It is passing from generation to generation, with the narratives embedded. The copper craft of India embeds more such stories inherently, which have been expressed through the shapes and texture from the metal age until today. The narratives are said to be open-ended for interpretation. Thus, it uses the existing categories of narrative in product design to decode it in copper craft products designed by artisans. The research uses a narrative interview approach adapted under the Copper Craft Research for Design (Cu RfD) methodology. The research aims to investigate the hidden associative narratives and their method. It could therefore be applied explicitly to develop contemporary forms in copper craft under Copper Craft Research through Design (Cu RtD) methodology.

Keywords

Narratives, Copper Craft Products, Form and Texture, Process.

Introduction

The narrative is generally seen in psychology, sociology, and humanities (Bruce et al., 2016). Bruner, in his research, introduced the concept of *life as narrative*, which is said to be one of the most natural ways to exchange information because it evokes more meaning, emotion, and engage in *world making* through creating, telling, recording, and reading stories (Steffen, 2009; Bruner,1987). Mieke Bal, in his research, justified how narrative is *the most widespread semiotic mode of expression, as it is ubiquitous to most human communication techniques* (Bal, 2016). Art and Craft are such areas where we have been hearing the stories from ancestors that are connected to the products and the techniques of making. It is passing from generation to generation, with the narratives embedded. The copper craft of India embeds more such stories inherently, which have been expressed through the emotional relationship of the craft person, the degree of imperfection from human touch in the shapes and texture since the metal age. For example, in the PhD research work of Zoran, where he expresses that the craft is engaging in an intimate process and enjoying the experience of shaping raw material, which results in the unique product carrying personal narratives where the identity of the maker can be observed in the process (Zoran, 2013). Similarly, Alonso C. mentioned that the layering of symbolism and personal and cultural interpretation is observed in jewellery crafts (Alonso, 2015).

Similarly in Niedderer and Townsend (2010) research Section 2.2 also states that in the context of craft the emotional aspect of makers becomes the layering of personal and experiential narratives in the product. It has also been associated with the design process, where a Design Thinking approach depends on the narratives and storytelling for empathizing with the user (Hellstrom, 2007). Also, Fritsch et al. have explored beyond the experiential aspect of storytelling to gain an empathetic understanding. They have used repetitive narratives for briefing or presenting user studies (Fritsch et al., 2007). Likewise, brand designers count on storytelling in every interaction, from advertisement to packaging. Lelis et al. identified six main narrative dimensions of logos in contemporary brands for extending the benefit of increasing brand engagement and meaningful brand experiences to design appropriate visual storytelling strategies (Lelis & Kreutz, 2019). These examples ascertain that narratives are open-ended for interpretation. This research uses the existing narrative categories in product design (Grimaldi et al., 2013) to decode it in copper craft products designed by artisan cum designers. The following section explains the categories for overlaying the framework to copper craft products.

Narratives in Design

The paper uses narrative theory to explore its use in design research. The theory categories narratives into the definition, typology, and functions in design to create a narrative design process.

1. *Definitions*

In the framework, it has five different definitions pertaining to different keys as follows:

- D1: It indicates one event, where for example, it started to snow which states the change of weather. It is generally used to analyze narratives that are not specifically literary texts.
- D2: In this definition, it states multiple activities in chronological order. For example, the Kawad box-States the various activities of one character in a chronological way.
- D3: Represents one or more characters in a series of chronological events that are connected by causality or agency. For example, this kind of narrative is used in product marketing with causation: The fruit drink is healthier than other brands as it contains added vitamins.
- D4: Emotion evoking or value-laden representation of one or more characters in a series of chronological events that are connected by causality or agency. This has been used to influence user behavior- for example, the narrative about product sustainability is set to evoke emotion and meant to affirm good and bad behaviour.

- ▪ D5: Represents one or more characters in a series of chronological events that are connected by causality or agency, and which progress through conflicts toward a climax. Such kind of narratives is generally used in film or fairy tales, for instance, the story of *little red riding hood* which progresses through conflict but ends at a positive climax by evoking various emotions in different events.

2. *Typology of Narrative Use in Design*

This category explains which narratives are suggested by design. The typology is explained by keeping in the user's nostalgic association with the objects. While using the object the narrative emerges and evokes the emotions behind it (Table 1).

Table 1: *Typology of narrative use in design.*

Sr. No.	Cluster	Sub Cluster and Description	Examples
1	Cluster 1: Design facilitates a narrative	1. This category triggers a personal memory or association of a significant event, place, time or person. It includes objects specifically designed to trigger the cultural meaning of a user. Example 1: Alessi's Anna G corkscrew Example 2: The shape of the door handle is taken from an old coach handle, the type of coach pulled by horses before cars. This form of handle is used to trigger the original character (Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007).	Source: https://alessi.com Source: Fukasawa and Morrison (2007)
		2. In this the designer inspires narratives but keeps it open-ended for personal interpretation. For example, Tony Dunne and Fiona Nipple chair.	Source: https://designlobster.substack.com/
2	Cluster 2: The narrative supports the design process	1. It is used as a tool to understand and empathise with users. The classic example which has gained popularity is the dream recorder by Bill Gaver which has made people share intimate information.	Source: Cultural Probes and the Value of Uncertainty, Interaction Design, Royal College of Art.
		2. Designer uses narrative elements in the design process that becomes a guiding principle for design to spark imagination and creativity and motivates the choice of material, form, and function. For example, the Freya's Cabin.	Source: https://www.dezeen.com/
3	Cluster 3: Design delivers a narrative	1. This category uses narrative external to the object. For example, while making the buying decision of any brand the influential factor for it is the advertisement and word of mouth. Similarly, a product from Droog design, Tree Trunk Bench uses external narratives more explicitly.	Source: www.droog.com
		2. The designer visualises the interaction between user and product which evokes user experience over time. For instance, the on-edge lamp by Silvia Grimaldi is designed to discover the surprising element over time in terms of form, material, and working.	Source: www.researchgate.net, The-On-Edge-Lamp-by-Silvia-Grimaldi.

3. *Narrative Functions in Design*

The narrative is used as a tool at different stages of the design process and product use. This typology explains how narratives are used in the design or design process? It is grouped into seven clusters from NF1 to NF7.

- NF1: Conveying information: The design process has been used to communicate insights about the current product use by creating scenarios.
- NF2: Evoking reflectivity: The narrative in the design process has been used to highlight the design problem or cultural issue that involves unusual situations.
- NF3: Showing/Teaching values: Uses it to convey the dos and don'ts of user-product interaction and product use.
- NF4: Empathy & Identification: The user or persona narratives are often used in this case.
- NF5: Imagination & Creativity: Used by designers to spark imagination and creativity like Freya's Cabin.
- NF6: Memorability, and NF7: Delighting: examples of Alessi's Anna or Grimaldi's on-edge lamp are meant to delight and increase memorability in users.

By understanding the framework described above, this research overlaid and analysed the experience of narrative appears in copper craft products designed by the artisan.

Methodology

This section explains the research methodology applied to the study, one that fits into the broad field of design research. It has applied Frayling's strategies of research for design (RfD) and research through design (RtD) that has been used in the research work of Goldstein et al. (2014). Kokinen et al. (2011), in the book design research through practice, states an identical theory with an example of *iFloor*, which is designed to bring back interaction to the library. Such kind of experimental research has become the choice for constructive design researchers that expand the theory *beyond research through design* (Kokinen et al., 2011). Thus Golstejin explained that RfD/RtD is an appropriate research methodology when exploring with craft (Golsteijn et al., 2014; Golsteijn, 2014). The narrative theory adopted emotions, nostalgia, and many things in addition to the observations to derive the insightful meanings; hence this research adopted the methodology of Rfd and Rtd. For applying this methodology to the copper craft product (Figure 1) it has been reframed wherein the Copper Craft Research for Design (Cu RfD) would decode the narrative of the copper product. Interviewing the artisan by generating codes or metaphors for the copper craft research through design will help design products with new narratives. Also, this research has used the strategies of copper craft research for design (Cu RfD) to analyse the copper product into the narrative design framework.
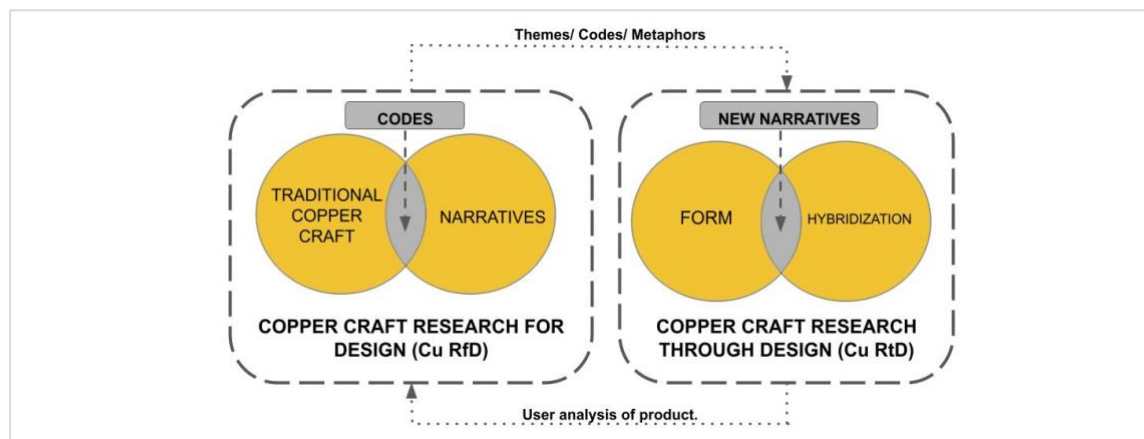

Figure 1: *Using Cu RfD and Cu RtD together (Adapted and redesigned from Golsteijn et al. (2014)).*

Copper Craft Research for Design (Cu RfD): Narrative Interview Approach

To carry out RfD, Golsteijn et al. suggested using a narrative interview approach with the artisan to gain meaningful design insights for it (Golsteijn et al., 2014). A narrative interview approach is planned to extract narratives and analyse the stories interwoven with the products they have to tell about a certain topic and related background stories. Because a narrative interview leaves an interviewee relatively free — compared to a semi-structured interview, for example— it is particularly useful for exploratory research projects. It is not known which questions or answers may lead to valuable and meaningful insights (Bruner, 1987). Relatively, Grimaldi et al. also claimed to use insights from narrative theory to define its concept, which is, to explore the use of narratives in design research and show the different functions of narrative in design (Grimaldi et al., 2013). It is used in many areas of design for different purposes (Grimaldi et al., 2013). This method found to be most appropriate for this study is confirmed. The narrative interview approach has been applied to understand the narrative as a developmental process for designing copper craft products. In the first stage, the interview was conducted by Mr Bhalachandra Kadu, an artisan who designs copper products through his experiences in design, production, and marketing insights. He and his workshop are in Pune (Figure 2). Mr Kadu was encouraged to tell the stories associated with the design and development of the form of copper craft product and the design process. The questionnaires were prepared with an objective to derive the associative narratives with the product, and for that, they were focused on the following topics; however, the session conducted was organic:

- The process of the copper craft?
- Learning of the copper craft?
- Materials and tools or technology they used; what made it evolve and transform?
- What were the different textures created? What was the influence to develop a particular texture?
- How do you see any cultural influence on design?
- Does the design vary from one context to another?
- Do you see that there is inherent/regional culture associated with the design? What is the character that defines them?

Figure 2: *Snippet from the interview recording with Mr Bhalachandra Kadu at his workshop, Pune (Kansara P., 2022, On-field interview at Mr Kadu's workshop, Pune).*

The findings (i.e. codes-Figure 3) from this study will be subsequently used to inform design activities and the development of a concept prototype for Cu RtD in future work.
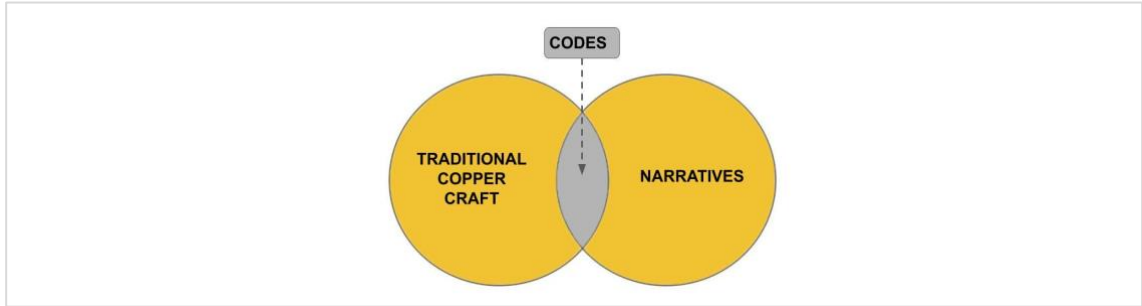
Figure 3: *Diagram examining narratives of the traditional copper craft product generating codes.*

Finding of the Narrative Interview Approach

The interview study addressed multiple angles like form, texture, tools, and process development. By systematically breaking up the transcripts into codes, it has been observed that extracted codes led to the narrative turn for the development of the copper product, which is demonstrated in Figure 4. The major focus area is understanding the product for narratives in developing the form and the textures for finishing.
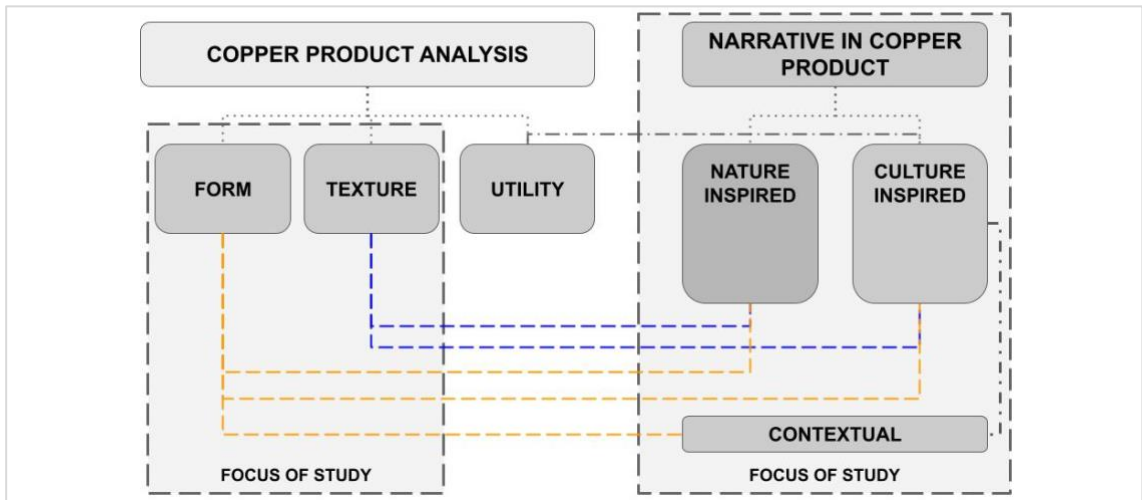

Figure 4: *Demonstration of copper product analysis with the narratives decoding.*

In the entire process, six products were evaluated with the narrative interview approach method for generating codes in Cu RfD (Figure 5).

Figure 5: *Graphical representation of the dominant character of narrative (Kansara P., 2022, on-field photo documentation of the products, Pune).*

From the above, Figure 5 will explain in detail the narratives of product 1. In the product 1 *Mukhwas*[1] container, which an artisan designed in 1985, he says that the *Mukhwas* eating after the meal has always been a part of the culture. The form was developed by understanding the functionality aspect-women of the home offers, considering the proportion of the hand (Figure 6).
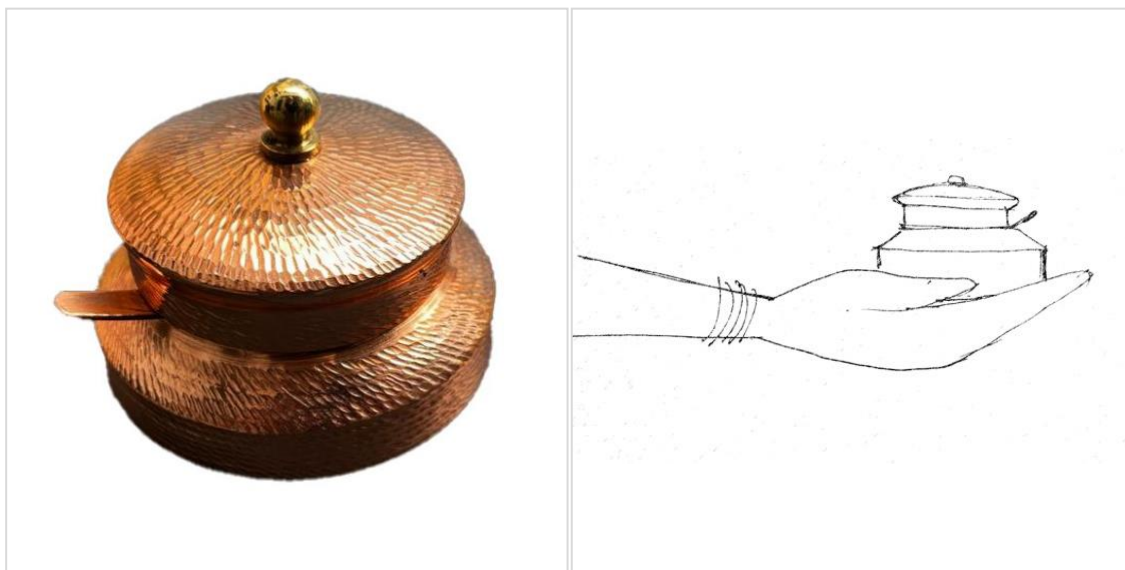

Figure 6: *Product 1 from Figure 5 - Mukhwas container & cultural influence: ability to hold and offer (Kansara P., 2022, on-field photo documentation of the product, Pune).*

The texture or the *Mathar Kaam*[2] is inspired by nature; it looks like a flower (Figure 7). To develop this pattern of flower which is not like the regular *Mathar Kaam* which goes in a right angle pattern. In this flower texture, the tool is hammered (*Mathar Kaam*) on the product by sitting at an angle (Figure 7). In the above product 1, narratives flow with the texture perceived like a flower that symbolizes freshness with fragrance, further relating to the product's function to give freshness to our mouth.
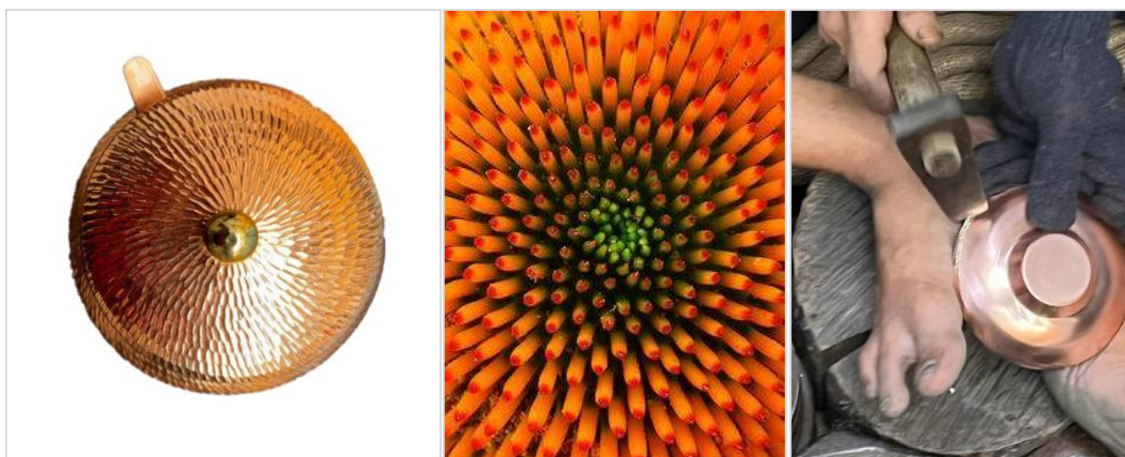

Figure 7: *Product Texture inspired from nature- flower (Texture developed by hammering at an angle to create the flower pattern) (Kansara P., 2022, on-field photo documentation of the product and process, Pune).*

[1] It is an edible food item used for the refreshment of the mouth. It is a local word used in Indian houses.

[2] A local word used by copper artisans for the hammering process to develop either texture or form. Here Mathar Kaam is the process used for getting a final finish i.e. texture to the product.

Similarly, decoding the same product *Mukhwas* container designed by the artisans before 1985, i.e. product 2 in Figure 5, uses the embossing process, which also had the impression of the necklace worn by the women. Artisan explains it by saying that the neck of the container looks like the neck of the woman, so the texture decision for that particular form is like a necklace of the woman (Figure 8). In this product, the narratives symbolise the style aesthetic used by women. It reflects the cultural element representation to the product.

Figure 8: *Right: Moti Chincha Pati set (traditional jwellery). Left: Product 2 from Figure 5 Mukhwas container designed before 1985 (Kansara P., 2022, on-field photo documentation of the product and process, Pune).*

The next form, i.e. product 3 in Figure 5, developed, has the texture embossed inspired to have a flower pattern. The aesthetic carving on the wooden pillars of *Wada*[1] has the impression of the same pattern (Figure 9). The established narratives are from nature, the petal element continuing to be identified in the carving of *Wada* architecture.

Figure 9: *Right: Pillar of houses in Tambat lane. Left: Product 2 from Figure 5 Mukhwas container (Kansara P., 2022, on-field photo documentation of the product and process, Pune).*

So, reflecting on the use of the narrative has always been a part of the artisan's way of developing the copper product's form and texture. The culture of the society dominates the development of the form of the copper product for the master artisans. In contrast, his experiential narratives dominated the final finish of the copper product, i.e. texture developed due to *Mathar Kaam*, which is more inspired by the experience and journey that the master artisans have had with nature. There is an association between the regional and cultural characters from the thought process to the final product. In the copper craft products of Mr Kadu, the dominant characteristic is the texture so the major association of narrative is in the texture for which he has designed and developed tools and techniques.

Further overlaying the framework of narratives in product design and reflecting on the use of narratives in copper products from the perspective of the five different definitions D1-D5 it is observed that D — Definition of a logically sequenced narrative— is applied frequently by the artisan in the development of texture. In D3, the artisan gives insight into the decisions with a causal link between form and texture from the interview. It also uses a narrative to represent multiple characters — activities for making the product— in a chronology.

[1] It is a local word used to depict the traditional Marathi culture houses.

There are situations where the artisan uses (Cluster 1.1, 2.2, and NF5) narrative elements in the design process as a tool to spark imagination and creativity. The texture of the copper craft product is specifically designed to activate the associative memory. Thus the function is to hold *Mukhwas*, which relates to the metaphor of freshness being represented in the abstracted form of flower texture on the product, indirectly associating with the analogy.

Conclusion

The research reflecting the narrative is closely associated with the craft products directly or indirectly. It is part of the domains involved in psychology, sociology, and humanities, followed by its use in the design domain to understand the user better. Traditionally, copper craft has always demonstrated the use of narratives in the products that pass from generation to generation. This research analyses the use of narratives in the design, development of form, and texture of the copper craft product designed by an artisan. It is found that the artisans were attentively taking decisions on forms while working on the spinning machine, followed by the decisions over the pattern of the textures. He followed a nonlinear approach to designing. His knowledge, exposure, and involvement with nature influence his decisions over form and texture. It is noticed that there is extensive use of narrative in the design process of copper craft products by overlaying the existing categories of narrative. It acts as a tool to spark creativity and imagination and creativity specifically to develop the texture. It is observed that the texture of the copper craft product has been the dominating character which enhances the strength of the copper craft product and also evokes associative narratives. The principle of order in disorder is explored in organic texture associated with nature.

In future work, the associative narratives could be applied explicitly to develop contemporary forms in copper craft under Copper Craft Research through Design (Cu RtD) methodology.

Acknowledgement

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[1] It is a local word used for products used for heating water for bathing.

[2] It is a local word for the product used to store water traditionally for kitchen use.

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