

THE SEAT OF THE SOUL AND THE SOUL OF THE SEAT: VALUING THE ART OF THE TRADITIONAL UPHOLSTERER

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ABSTRACT

The research study explores the concept of storytelling as a method to facilitate the communication of the art of the traditional upholsterer to add value to professionally restored chairs and sofas within the context of design and sustainable practice.

INTRODUCTION

In the UK today, amateur craft-workers are joining trained craft workers in bringing hand-crafted items to the marketplace. Online platforms such as eBay and Etsy are popular trade outlets that support the set-up and operation of such micro businesses allowing craft workers to sell their wares, including re-upholstered and upcycled period (pre-twentieth century) chairs and sofas. However, without formal training the art of upholstery is somewhat devalued in the marketplace as well as the resulting re-upholstered products. Craft workers tend to favour the online platform Etsy over eBay as the former is dedicated to craft and vintage, whereas traders on the latter are mostly concerned with selling product, new or second hand (in its current state). Etsy was formed as craft workers were not realising a fair monetary value for their hand-crafted products. There is an assumption that consumers purchasing from Etsy traders value craft and the work of craft workers, yet, Luckman (2013, p. 260) recognised that due to the lack of ‘gatekeeping on formal training’ on Etsy, craft items are still subject to fixed prices that devalue craft items produced by trained craft workers with comparatively higher skill sets and expertise. Interestingly, Etsy traders use storytelling as a method of communicating with potential buyers. According to Strine and Shoup (2011, p. 159) Etsy customers want ‘pieces with a past – something that has a story’. This paper draws on observations and insights from personal experience as a trained upholsterer and literature in order to reflect on the value of traditional upholstery methods, techniques and materials in relation to sustainable practice and how the consideration of design is critical to ensure that period upholstered furniture (with a particular focus on nineteenth century pieces) can have a place in the contemporary home.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Edwards (1996) attributes three main concepts that affected the design of eighteenth century furniture: An increasing range of available materials; the relatively speedy dissemination of technical knowledge (through journals and pattern books, and through apprenticeships); and the demand of high quality and stylish products, including imitations of previous times. Many of the publications at this time promoted the concept of good taste, which influenced many of the furniture designs. This was coupled with leisure and luxury as important factors of polite society (Edwards, 1996, p. 11). Some entrepreneurial craftsmen, such as Thomas Sheraton and George Hepplewhite organised their businesses using advanced selling techniques (Edwards, 1996, p. 16). Interestingly, in 1747, according to Edwards (1996, p. 17) the master upholsterers of that time were described in a similar manner to how many craft-upholsterers operate today as being 'those who keep no shops nor stocks but principally follow making and dispose of their goods as fast as they are finished'. During the eighteenth century 'mysteries' (trade secrets) were controlled by the trade Guilds. The upholstery craft was sub-divided between genders. Male workers, who would have served apprenticeships were responsible for cutting expensive materials and women, who were unskilled would cut cheaper materials. Working with the stuffings was a further division of labour that required a different skill set. Following the demise of the Guilds, the mysteries of the upholstery trade were exposed with more of the trade secrets being more widely known (Edwards, 1996, p. 73).

During the nineteenth century more emphasis was put on comfort. Horse hair and coiled springs contributed greatly to this, the techniques for their use however required a great deal of skill and for this reason the mechanisation of the trade was greatly resisted (Edwards, 1993, p. 112). Yet, the use of springs revolutionised chair making allowing for more elaborate designs (Edwards, 1993, p. 114). Chair frames required a redesign as seats created from a pad of hair and layers of a mix of fibres require a relatively shallow depth compared to that of with a spring base structure. Springs also increase the stress on a frame. With the introduction of springs, a new chair profile was also required in order to allow for the upwards and downwards movement of the springs. The seat underpinning comprising a spring base, appropriate layers of stuffing, an intermediate cover which is most likely to be calico, and a covering fabric, according to Edwards (1993, p. 114) this became the 'hallmark of Victorian furnishings'. The button-back and button seat also became particular design features of this time, which originated as a method to keep the hair and other stuffing in place. For the unassuming consumer this appeared as a design feature. Edwards proposes that the popularity of this style may also have been due to the apparent suggestion of a considerable amount of workmanship.

Today, as in the preceding centuries, upholstery has an important role to play in the home, offering comfort and warmth in addition to the aesthetic. Brewer (in Edwards et al, 2005, p. 22) recognises the relationship between upholstery and the meaning it portrays of the home-owner. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the upholsterer's job

role was more akin to that of the modern day interior designer, or interior stylist. At that time upholsterers would have used the upholstered furniture to inform other design aspects in a room including the wallpaper and other wall coverings, carpets and rugs, curtains / drapes, lighting, mirrors and other decorative items (Edwards et al, 2005, p. 22). A particular systematic approach to the arrangement of materials and stitch techniques were developed to control the placement and movement of the horse hair and other fibres particularly at points of stress, such as the front seat edge. It is believed that such techniques, or at least the concept was adapted from those of the saddler. Such techniques also impact on the aesthetic of the final design of the chair. The materials and techniques must therefore match the frame construction. The covering textiles should also work with the room in which the upholstered piece is to be housed (Edwards et al, 2005, p. 23). Such considerations must also be taken into account today by the upholsterer which is lacking in the novice and amateur craft worker.

The upholstery trade remained relatively unchanged despite technological advances in other industries until the development and introduction of man-made foam fillings in the twentieth century. Full upholstery requires considerable skill as the chair is created through the addition of layers of stuffing and is therefore labour intensive. The overall process can be considered in three categories: the stuffings; cutting the materials for the inner covering and the final top fabric covering. As most chairs and sofas were made to order the factory system was not conducive of this approach to production (Edwards, 1993, p. 115). To understand fully the implications of materials and production techniques one should be fully aware of demand and to appreciate the relationship of the object and the consumer is to understand the hidden meanings of the design of the upholstered piece (Edwards, 1993, p. 171-172). This basic concept still stands today and should be fully appreciated and applied by the modern day upholsterer for today's marketplace and discerning consumer. New materials and techniques came into their own by the 1960s which again impacted on the construction of the frame (Edwards, 1994, p. 7). In the USA the factory system was adopted much earlier than in the UK where well into the twentieth century upholsterers undertook all of the upholstery tasks to complete the entire chair as a one-man job (Edwards, 1993, p. 91). For the contemporary craft, or master, upholsterer this is still the case and therefore upholstery is a highly skilled craft. Victorian furniture in particular has parts of the frame showing, known as show-wood. The techniques required to upholster such pieces requires a particularly high skill level.

THE MARKETPLACE

The growth of demand for upholstered chairs and sofas throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in the mass production of quality furniture (Edwards, 1996, p. 3); many examples of which have survived and are readily available in the second hand marketplace today. Through the ongoing vintage movement in the UK, USA and Europe second hand chairs of all ages are again in high demand. Craft workers and trained upholsterers are taking advantage of this opportunity to restore, recycle and/ or upcycle examples for the modern homes of contemporary consumers. The trend has also attracted

a large number of entrepreneurial traders of second hand products. Some simply buy and re-sell items in their current state while others re-upholster chairs and sofas prior to re-selling. Such craft-based micro businesses trade largely through online platforms, craft and vintage fairs, vintage and retro boutiques and flea markets. Improving the appearance of second hand products through recycling and upcycling techniques is considered to be of benefit to the environment. However, while the practice has been connected to sustainable practice, this may not necessarily be the case at the hands of untrained upholstery craft workers. The inclusion of design appears to be lacking suggesting that their wares are perhaps produced for more ethical reasons, or more so in consideration of sustainability by those, and for those who enjoy craft items. Andrew Wagner (Levine and Heimerl, 2008, p. 1) suggests that some may like hand crafted items for the craftsmanship quality and that these individuals do recognise the crafter's time and effort, while others may simply enjoy the uniqueness of the items. Luckman (2013, p. 249) suggests that the recent interest in craft across the UK, Europe, American and Australia predominantly is largely due to the potential for small-business capability through the existence of the internet.

Observations and analysis of original upholstery and examples of re-upholstered pieces, particularly from the 1970s craft revival by amateur craft workers, tells a story in itself of inappropriate methods, materials and even design used to keep quality chairs and sofas from landfill, or as an economical method of obtaining something that appears to be new. With the current popularity of craft as a support for the vintage trend and for sustainable practice, individuals with no formal design knowledge or training are able to bring inferior product to market. This is demonstrated briefly in the following reflection.

A REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

The mid-nineteenth century chair shown in figure 1 was fully re-upholstered using traditional methods and materials of its time and covered in a modern fabric (c.2010). When purchased from auction the chair was covered in a typical 1970s fabric, shown in figure 2 and the 1970s upholstery foam stuffing is shown in figure 3. The rebuilding of the chair upholstery is shown in figures 4 and 5.

The inner upholstery shape created by the recent traditional upholstery works with the chair frame as it would have been intended by the frame-maker. The chair in its previous 1970s re-upholstered state did not show any appreciation of the design of the frame. By adding foam to the existing materials created an undesirable shape and most certainly an uncomfortable shape to the inside of the chair. While the upholsterer may declare artistic licence, a substandard product resulted from the 1970s re-upholstery project. Also the materials used are particularly damaging to the environment when discarded to landfill now. William Arthur Smith Benson (cited in Adamson, 2010, p. 16) had stated in 1893 that there was a need for the student (craftsperson / entrepreneur) to understand 'beauty'

and to realise a ‘lifelong respect for craftsmanship’. Similarly, Hal Riegger, when speaking of pottery, had also declared that the craftsperson is ultimately responsible ‘for the whole process’ having ‘an ethical as well as a practical aspect’ and that ‘apparently simple techniques can often require more rather than less skill, because they lack the safeguards of more technically complex processes’ (Adamson, 2010, p. 34). It is inferred that craft workers will compromise on quality if they have little or no knowledge or appreciation for design and craftsmanship.

The chair shown in figure 2 was purchased in the UK from a local auction house. The materials used for the 1970s re-upholstery is reminiscent of a time when the upholstery craft was experiencing a revival in society probably in part due to the economic recession. The quality of the upholstery work suggests that the upholsterer would have had some amount of experience. Yet, the re-shaping of the inside of the chair resulted in a bulky look with a disproportionate appearance for the size of the chair. The Michelin Man, which was the marketing symbol of the UK tyre company may have been the inspiration for the shape. The Michelin Man’s appearance was that of being made of a number of piled-up tyres. He appeared in many of the company’s advertisements throughout the 1970s. The chair in its 1970s re-upholstered state was rather uncomfortable as the tyre-like shaping was intrusive. Chairs of the mid-nineteenth century would have been designed for comfort and would have given the sitter firm support. As can be seen in figure 6 below, the original horse hair stuffing was largely retained and poor quality foam was applied directly over this to change the shape. There were some structural defeats to the frame that, it would appear, the 1970s upholsterer had not repaired. Figure 7 shows the necessary repairs made during the recent upholstery project.

While it was not uncommon to replace the top fabric and do minor repairs to the stuffing, a practice considered to be most sustainable, in the case of the chair above, this was not a sustainability solution but a low-cost re-upholstery solution. It should be noted that sustainability would not have been a primary consideration in the 1970s.

In the following example a chaise longue was purchased from eBay. The chaise had been very recently re-upholstered by a novice while studying upholstery on an evening course. The seller was proud of the fact that she had re-used the original Victorian springs, however, the springs were in poor condition which resulted in a seating base that had little support and comfort. The chaise was totally stripped down (figure 8), the distorted shape of the springs is evident in figure 9. Figure 10 shows the new spring structure. These examples, as with many other examples at the author’s disposal, promoted the question of design and craftsmanship which is further considered through theory along with sustainability.

TRADITIONAL MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

From around the 1820s horse hair became the most preferred material for the main stuffing, it was also the most expensive. In order to reduce the cost coir (coconut fibre), or shredded grass and leaves, wood shavings (excelsior) and seaweed (alva marina) would be used as substitute materials. (Edwards et al, 2005, p. 26). Other materials include webbings which are mostly made of jute, hessian fabrics of various weights, scrim (a fine woven fabric usually made of cotton), calico and top fabrics of various fibre content, weight and woven structure (James, 1999, p. 59-62). Stuffings are available in a number of fibre types, qualities and weights including wool felt, cotton wadding and polyester (James, 1999, p. 67-71). Each fibre and material structure will behave differently and will provide a different quality to the upholstery in terms of functionality, aesthetic and comfort. Skilled upholsterers will understand their materials; sustainability conscious upholsterers will have a greater understanding of the impact of the materials they use on the environment.

Traditional techniques vary, springs may or may not be used depending on the frame design. In any case a strong secure upholstery base is necessary to provide the sitter with support and comfort. As layers of stuffing are used to create such a base various techniques are used to secure the materials in a manner that will ensure that the chair or sofa will withstand a great deal of use with minimum damage to the arrangement of the stuffings. Much of this is achieved through a series of stitch types to create sturdy edges and an even arrangement of stuffing across all areas of the chair (James, 1999, p. 168-177). Fine stitching is also required in particular areas of the top covering to join sections of fabric. As well as having extreme dexterity and finesse for the outer appearance of the piece, the upholsterer requires considerable strength for the inner construction. Figure 11 shows the roll edge that was created by the stitch technique. The tram line stitches are there to support the second layer of horse hair and a close up of the stitching beneath the roll edge. The rows of stitches that support the seat edge are shown in figure 12.

CRAFTSMANSHIP, DESIGN AND SUSTAINABILITY

Frayling (2011, p. 1) purports that craftsmanship increasing in popularity at times of austerity and that craft requires skill. According to Richard Sennett (2008, p. 9), skill can be related to a possible need or 'desire to do a job well'. The author had previously noted concern of the notion of craft 'being one from the television viewer's perspective' (Cassidy, 2016) 'watching [the experts] from a distance, while sometimes encouraging less skilled punters to have a go themselves' (Frayling, 2011). If the activity being watched is to be repeated at home for family and friends, there is no harm done. However, the novice crafter selling their wares in the marketplace may result in low quality products with low sustainable design consideration. As Richard Sennett (2008, p. 59) states, 'craft, the pleasure of making and the time taken in improving skills are just as important to the functioning of a modern society as they were in the medieval era of the guilds'.

Victor Papanek, an advocate of responsible design, both socially and ecologically, had accused designers (circa 1972) of ‘creating useless, unnecessary and unsafe products’ and promoting ‘materialistic lifestyles’; which rather flies in the face of sustainable design and practice. The over-production of goods and the encouragement of excessive consumption habits, largely supported by marketing efforts has created what Papanek coined an emphasis on ‘stuff-lust’ (Cassidy, 2016). Chris Sherwin (2012), head of sustainability at Seymour-Powell design and innovation consultancy, had also questioned how much of the exhibited product shown at the 2012 London Design Week would be destined for landfill. He did however recognise that ‘design skills are to be more intrinsic in the production of sustainable products’ (Cassidy, 2016) where ‘creativity, entrepreneurship, innovation and practical solutions’ are purported to be central to the next ‘wave of sustainability’ (Sherwin, 2012). Edelkoort (n.d) proposed that some craft items will ‘become new design collectibles within a matter of decades’. This would only be possible by using appropriate design, high quality materials and appropriate techniques to better ensure a longer life-cycle of the product. This paper also proposes that such product would only be created through well-trained designers and craftspeople who clearly understand their craft in relation to sustainability, and who have a high regard for design and craftsmanship.

In addition, consumers tend to demonstrate little or no real understanding of sustainability, and may possibly be in denial where excessive consumption is concerned, as they engage fully with ‘stuff-lust’. Craft-workers are unlikely to consider sustainability in relation to their own practice in terms of reducing waste from the production process, nor considering what to do with waste from the re-upholstery process, let alone how the consumer will use and ultimately dispose of the item. With continued use upholstery work becomes less resilient and will need to be replaced. Some materials such as horse hair can be washed and reused.

Brewer (in Edwards et al, 2005, p. 26) considers original horse hair to be far more superior to modern day hair and therefore should be re-used where possible to improve the quality of the upholstery, sustainable practice would therefore be considered to be an added benefit. Provided the upholstery work is correctly covered with an intermediate covering such as calico soiled and worn top covers can be replaced at a much cheaper cost than a full re-upholstery job which would also produce less waste product and therefore be more beneficial to the environment. As Brewer further states, ‘unless we start, by conservation and restoration, to value those fragments that do exist, we shall lose the upholsterers art. What is needed are clients with enough understanding and vision to instruct their upholsterers to retain as much original material as possible and to adapt their techniques to replicate the honest work of their predecessors’. However, in order for this to be a possibility the general public need to be well informed of the value of traditional materials and techniques to fully appreciate their period furniture. Possibly more so, consumers need to be more knowledgeable about the period furniture they are purchasing. In the following section storytelling is explored as a communication tool for this very purpose.

STORYTELLING

For Etsy, storytelling is the narrative that the craft-seller creates in order to inform the buyer about the history and restoration of the item. It may include details of how the seller gained the expertise to undertake the job and any other particular points of interest to bring about a personal story for the item (Strine and Shoup, 2011). Storytelling is also a very-well accepted research and communications method. According to Sanders (2000), storytelling can be used to identify and formulate a problem state.

Gathering data through ‘story gathering’ and then creating further stories enables the researcher to understand ‘complex interconnected situations.’ Similarly, storytelling can be used to communicate such situations to audiences including stakeholders and clients. In basic terms, storytelling is a tool to be used for data collection in relation to narratives and other desired information from participants that can then be analysed, evaluated and synthesised for the identification of problem solutions (Wilkins, 2004). Sanders also states that storytelling as a tool can be used to great effect in co-design as self-expressions of participants can be captured. Harrington and Mickelson (2009) value the tool as a precursory research method to obtain data to use for the development of a survey. This method is particularly useful when the researcher needs to fully understand participants’ emotions towards the problem state. Wilkins (2004) provides a useful step-by-step guide for story building:

- ‘Share individual personal stories
- Mediate stories through a journal, picture, etc.
- Re-tell stories publicly modified by others’ input
- Recast stories based on previous steps and other information (e.g. a literature review)
- Synthesise a group story in which participants can see their own story’.

Wilkins also provides a list of storytelling techniques by way of examples, these include: Storytelling in a digital context or in a visual context through the use of ‘storyboards, scenario generation, videos, plays [performance], animation, [and a mix of] talk and image or text and image’. Erickson (1996) proposes that the tool is beneficial for the latter stages of a research project as ‘an effective method for design knowledge transfer’; and that stories can be used to ‘convince people of the validation of a design’. It is claimed that this is possible due to stories being ‘engaging, memorable and easily passed on’ and are therefore ‘powerful communications tools’.

In order to develop a design story Parrish (2006) suggests approaches that researchers can adopt in order to develop and use a story, as follows:

- ‘Use it to communicate ideas to the client and team
- Use it as part of formative evaluation
- Use analysis details as the back-story
- Establish character and setting
- Inhabit the ‘learner’ in the story
- Improvise and allow yourself to be surprised with the outcome

- Use present tense and include ‘learner’ reflections, explore motivations, desires, etc., of the ‘learner’ in the story’

According to Templar (n.d.) storytelling is a highly effective method of communication because the human brain is ‘wired’ for them, in that, the brain cannot tell the difference between reality and fiction. We will therefore ‘immerse ourselves in stories as if we were a part of them’, and ‘experience [the] information’. In addition, if you are able to ‘communicate your story right ... you can get [others] to believe in your story just as strongly as you do’. This is the principle behind the use of storytelling on the Etsy platform. Templar suggests splitting the story into three sections as follows:

1. ‘The problem – What issues did you identify in your industry? What service or product was there a lack of?’
2. The journey – How did you go about researching a solution to this problem? How did you develop your product or service?’
3. The solution – How will your product or service change the industry or solve the problem?’

The following further advice is also provided by Templar: ‘If you’re asking someone to do something, like sign up to your product, then you have to make them care. Unless you’re very lucky, your offering won’t be the only one on the market. To make yours the one they choose, engage their emotions when you tell your story; Describe the trials you overcame; It’s worth it because, according to Gallup [Inc. – the American global performance-management consulting company], ‘consumers will give more money to the businesses they feel emotionally connected to.’ Templar reiterates that ‘the best communicators today are the ones who engage with their audience on a personal level, inviting them to hear their story and ensuring it lives up to expectations. Master this skill, and you will be well on your way to becoming an effective communicator’. For the reasons provided in this section storytelling can be recognised as being an appropriate tool to use to facilitate the communication of the art of the traditional upholsterer to add value to professionally restored chairs and sofas within the context of design and sustainable practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has considered personal observations and insights from the perspective of a trained upholsterer coupled with literature in order to reflect on the value of traditional upholstery methods, techniques and materials in relation to sustainable practice and how the consideration of design is critical to ensure that period upholstered furniture can have a place in the contemporary home. The paper has also explored the concept of using storytelling in this early stage of the research study as a potential method to facilitate the communication of the art of the traditional upholsterer to add value to professionally

restored chairs and sofas within the context of design and sustainable practice for the next stage of the research. The reflection on practice in particular reveals the art of the traditional upholsterer and substantiates why understanding the skill of this craft would add value to chairs and sofas re-upholstered in the traditional manner using traditional materials. This is valuable not only to the end product but also has favourable implications for sustainable practice within this craft. However, through practice innovation could still be incorporated into the design of the upholstery that could further benefit the sustainability of the product that will be explored in detail in the next stage of the research. Such innovations would then become part of the storytelling in order to inform the public of the benefits of supporting the livelihoods of upholstery experts and why their expertise should be maintained and valued.

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Figure 1: Newly upholstered mid-nineteenth century chair re-upholstered using traditional materials and techniques with a particular consideration of the frame design.



Figure 2: Purchased from auction (2010) previously re-upholstered in the c.1970s.



Figure 3: Shows the non-traditional material padding which is considered to devalue the chair in relation to authenticity for its age. The stuffing materials are harmful to the environment when disposed of. They also produced the un-flattering and uncomfortable design as evident in figure 2.



Figure 4: The stripped chair frame with new webbing on the inner back and inner arms showing the natural shape of the chair



Figure 5: The chair frame with the beginnings of the horse hair stuffing applied to the inner back and sides (traditional materials and techniques).



Figure 6: The original stuffing materials were exposed when removing the top fabric and the foam stuffing that had been applied during the 1970s re-upholstery work.



Figure 7: The repairs necessary to ensure a safe and sturdy chair frame are shown. The clamps hold the frame in place while the wood glue dries around the wooden dowels.



Figure 8: Stripping down (knocking down) a chaise longue reveals the poor support of the re-used original springs.



Figure 9: The distorted original springs

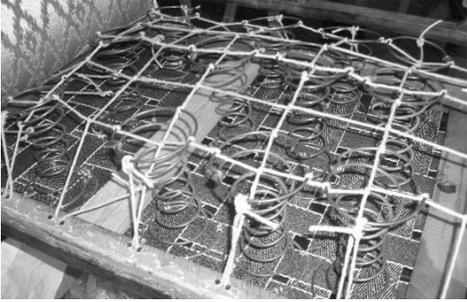


Figure 10: The new spring structure secured to the interlaced webbing

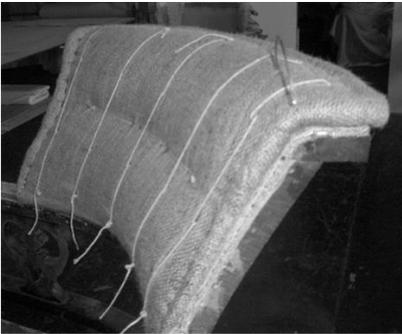


Figure 11: Shows the roll edge and the tram line stitches to hold the horse hair in place.

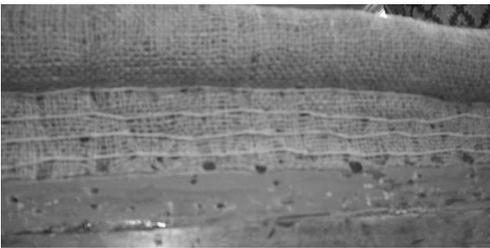


Figure 12: Shows the stitching beneath the roll edge supporting the edge of the seat.