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In Search of Identity: Rethinking Balinese Product Design through Cultural History

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ABSTRACT
Balinese product design is often recognized through visual signs such as ornament, material, craft technique, and references to tradition. Yet these signs do not fully explain how a design identity is formed or maintained. This paper revisits the history of Balinese product design through a cultural-historical perspective to examine identity as a process rather than a fixed style. Using literature, historical documents, manuscripts, colonial records, and visual documentation, the study traces recurring relations among local knowledge, patronage, external influence, tourism, and professional design practice. The findings suggest that Balinese design identity has developed through continuity and adaptation: new functions, materials, technologies, and markets have been incorporated without entirely displacing established systems of making and cultural reference. Balinese product design is therefore better understood as a historically negotiated design tradition than as a stable collection of visual attributes.

KEYWORDS
Balinese Product Design, Design Identity, Cultural History, Design Tradition, Global Design History

Introduction

Bali has long been recognized as an important centre of craft and creative production in Southeast Asia [1], [2], [3]. Furniture, textiles, jewellery, decorative objects, hospitality products, and lifestyle goods circulate through national and international markets and have been closely connected to the development of cultural tourism since the early twentieth century [3], [4], [5]. This visibility has made the phrase “Balinese product” appear self-evident. In practice, however, the identity of a Balinese product is difficult to define. It may refer to place of production, material, technique, visual style, cultural reference, or the social context in which an object is made and used [6], [7].

The problem becomes more complex when design is viewed historically. Balinese material culture has never developed in isolation. Hindu-Javanese relations, maritime trade,

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colonialism, tourism, industrial production, and contemporary globalization introduced new materials, technologies, functions, and markets [8], [9], [10]. These influences did not simply replace local practices. They were repeatedly translated through existing systems of knowledge, making, patronage, and aesthetic preference. The persistence of recognizable Balinese products therefore cannot be explained only by formal continuity [11].

Design history has also tended to privilege narratives centred on European and North American industrialization, professional designers, mass production, and modernist institutions [12], [13]. Such frameworks can make non-Western design traditions appear either pre-design, craft-based, or peripheral to modern design history. Global Design History has opened a wider field by examining objects, production, circulation, and cultural interaction across different historical systems [12]. This allows Balinese design to be considered not as an exception to design history, but as a historical design tradition with its own actors, institutions, forms of knowledge, and mechanisms of change.

Historical evidence supports this broader reading. Old Balinese inscriptions record specialized technical communities such as pandé, sangging, and undagi, while later manuscripts including Ashta Kosala-Kosali, Ashta Bhumi, Dharmaning Undagi, and Kaputusan Sang Anala preserve knowledge of proportion, measurement, construction, material, orientation, and appropriate practice [10], [14], [15], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19]. In the twentieth century, tourism and international markets altered the scale, function, and circulation of Balinese objects, while contemporary design education and creative industries introduced new professional categories. These layers suggest continuity but also repeated transformation.

This paper therefore asks a modest question: where can the identity of Balinese product design be located if neither origin nor visual style is sufficient on its own? Rather than proposing a definitive stylistic definition, the study reads identity historically. It examines how design knowledge, institutions, external influences, tourism, and professionalization have contributed to a recognizable yet changing tradition of product design in Bali.

Methods

The study uses a qualitative cultural-history approach. Design is treated as an analytical category for reading relationships among knowledge, actors, materials, technology, function, institutions, and social change rather than only as a modern professional occupation. Cultural history is appropriate for this purpose because objects can be examined simultaneously as material forms and as evidence of social practices and systems of meaning [20].

The sources consist of primary and secondary materials used in the earlier historiographical study on Balinese product design. Primary materials include Old Balinese inscriptions, design-related manuscripts, colonial reports, exhibition records, historical photographs, and documents concerning the development of products and tourism. Secondary sources include scholarship on Balinese history and tourism, material culture, craft, and design history. Sources were read contextually and compared across periods to identify recurring patterns of continuity and transformation. The analysis was thematic, following a process of identifying repeated themes and comparing them across different types of historical evidence [21]. This paper does

not attempt to provide a complete chronology of Balinese design. Its purpose is to identify historical mechanisms useful for discussing design identity.

Result

Historical Knowledge and Making Traditions

The historical material indicates that product making in Bali was supported by specialized bodies of knowledge long before the emergence of modern design education. References to pandé, sangging, and undagi indicate differentiated technical roles, while manuscript traditions codified aspects of proportion, material choice, construction, and procedure [8], [10], [14], [22], [23]. This evidence does not mean that these historical practitioners were "industrial designers" in the modern professional sense. It does show, however, that designing and making were organized through recognizable knowledge systems and social roles. The first component of Balinese design identity is therefore not a particular ornament, but the continuity of locally organized knowledge about how things should be conceived, made, and situated.

Adaptation Rather than Isolation

A second recurring pattern is adaptation to external influence. Bali was connected to wider political, religious, and commercial networks, and its products incorporated materials, motifs, functions, and technologies from outside the island [6], [7], [11]. The historical record therefore does not support an image of Balinese design as an isolated or culturally sealed tradition. Its continuity depended partly on the ability to absorb change. External elements could be reworked through local techniques, preferences, uses, and systems of meaning. Identity emerged through selective adaptation rather than through the preservation of an unchanged original form.

Tourism and the Production of Recognizable Balinese Products

Tourism intensified this process in the twentieth century. As Bali became an international destination, objects formerly associated with domestic, courtly, communal, or ceremonial contexts entered new circuits of display, sale, and collection. Products were resized, simplified, recombined, or redirected toward new functions and markets. Tourism therefore contributed to souvenirisation, but it also encouraged the consolidation of recognizable visual and material signs of "Bali" for external audiences [3], [4], [5]. This created an important tension. The market demanded recognizability, while producers continuously adjusted form, function, material, and price. Balinese product identity was consequently shaped both internally through inherited practices and externally through circulation and representation.

Professionalisation and Contemporary Expansion

The contemporary period adds another layer through design education, digital technologies, creative industries, small and medium enterprises, hospitality, and global collaboration. The actors involved in product development now include professional designers, academics, entrepreneurs, craftspeople, manufacturers, and creative-industry workers. Yet this professionalisation has not eliminated earlier modes of making [11], [24]. Contemporary practice often combines digital modelling, standardized production requirements, market

research, and modern branding with local materials, craft skills, cultural references, and close relationships between designing and making. The historical pattern is therefore cumulative rather than substitutive.

Discussion

The results suggest that the search for a Balinese product design identity should not begin with a checklist of visual features. Ornament, material, colour, and craft technique are important, but each can change, travel, or be reproduced elsewhere. A more durable identity appears in the relationships that allow products to remain culturally legible while their forms and functions change. These relationships include inherited knowledge, specialized makers, patronage and institutions, local practices of use, adaptation to external influence, and the capacity to respond to new markets.

This interpretation corresponds with design-history approaches that understand designed objects as products of social, economic, and cultural conditions rather than autonomous formal expressions [25], [26], [27]. From this perspective, Balinese design identity is not an essence hidden inside objects. It is an outcome of historical negotiation. A product may become recognizably Balinese not because every formal element is indigenous, but because external and local elements have been reorganized within a cultural and productive system that gives them a particular coherence.

The role of tourism illustrates this negotiation particularly clearly. Tourism did not simply commercialize an already finished cultural identity. It also participated in defining which forms, materials, images, and product types became visible as “Balinese” [3], [28]. At the same time, local makers and institutions were not passive recipients of tourist demand. They adjusted products to new circumstances while maintaining selected continuities. The category “Balinese product” can therefore be understood as relational: it is produced through exchanges among makers, users, institutions, markets, and changing ideas of Bali itself.

This historical reading also helps distinguish identity from authenticity. Asking whether a contemporary product is authentically Balinese can lead to a search for fixed origins or pure forms. Asking how its identity has been constructed directs attention instead to evidence of continuity, adaptation, and cultural positioning. The latter question is more compatible with the history described here, in which Balinese design repeatedly incorporated change without becoming historically disconnected from local systems of making and meaning.

For product design practice, this has a practical implication. Developing a contemporary Balinese identity need not mean adding traditional ornament to a modern object. A stronger approach is to understand the historical logic through which Balinese material culture has operated: attention to context, material knowledge, relationships between designer and maker, adaptation to use, and the ability to translate external influences into locally meaningful forms. Identity, in this sense, is less a visual formula than a design process situated in culture.

Conclusion

This paper reframes Balinese product design identity as a historical process rather than a fixed visual style. The evidence reviewed here points to several recurring mechanisms: continuity of technical knowledge, institutional and social support, adaptation to external influences, transformation through tourism and markets, and contemporary professionalisation. Together they show that change has been a persistent condition of Balinese design rather than evidence of its disappearance.

The search for identity therefore does not end with a single definition of what a Balinese product should look like. A more useful conclusion is that Balinese product design becomes recognizable through the continuing negotiation between inherited knowledge and new circumstances. Further studies focused on objects, periods, communities, or industries are needed to test this interpretation in greater empirical detail.

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