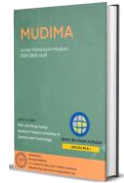




(MUDIMA)



The Role of Human Touch in the Form Exploration of Ong Cen Kuang's Lighting Designs

Putu Ari Darmastuti¹, Ni Kadek Yuni Diantari^{2*}, Ni Luh Kadek Resi Kerdiati³

Institut Seni Indonesia Bali

Corresponding Author: Ni Kadek Yuni Diantari diantariyuni@isi-dps.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

In the era of mass production, the role of human touch in contemporary design becomes increasingly significant, especially in affirming product exclusivity and authenticity. This article discusses the role of human touch in the manual craft techniques employed in the creation of Ong Cen Kuang's lighting products, specifically in the "Bungkus" (wrap) collection. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data was collected from exhibition catalogs, media articles, and direct observation in Ong Cen Kuang's studio and showcases. The "Bungkus" lighting products demonstrate that using crochet techniques with zipper materials creates unique forms that cannot be identically replicated. Moreover, the collaborative strategy between designers and artisans contributes to Ong Cen Kuang's identity as a slow-made, rare, and non-repetitive brand—highlighting exclusivity within the experience economy. This study underscores the importance of human touch in production processes to establish design identity rooted in local values and sustainability practices. It aims to enrich the discourse on craft-based contemporary design and serve as a reference for developing value-added design strategies in the creative industry era

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of modern design reflects a critical transition from mass industrial production toward the creation of more personal, experimental, and handmade products that emphasize intrinsic value. In decorative product design—particularly lighting—this trend encourages exploration of unconventional materials and active artisan involvement as resistance to design homogenization (Adamson, 2007; Sennett, 2009). As awareness of sustainability and originality increases, creations characterized by human craftsmanship are gaining relevance aesthetically, ethically, and emotionally (Flaxman, 2025).

Predictions for lighting design trends in 2025 indicate a shift toward organic materials, unique textures, and human craftsmanship involving manual techniques and distinctive forms that resist mass replication (Flaxman, 2025). In this context, Ong Cen Kuang's works emerge as a leading representation of contemporary, craft-oriented design from Indonesia. The studio treats lighting not merely as a functional element, but as a medium for cultural expression, narrative complexity, and emotional connection—derived from collaboration between designers and artisans.

A key aspect that distinguishes Ong Cen Kuang's lighting products is the artistic adaptation of everyday materials. The “Bungkus” collection creatively utilizes zippers—an unconventional material in lighting design—through innovative manual processing techniques.

The manual creative process by local artisans demands meticulous attention to detail, ensuring that each product exhibits a unique form, dynamic texture, and distinguished handmade quality (Kensan, 2021). However, there remains a significant gap in scholarly research specifically addressing how human hand skills influence design characteristics and enhance product exclusivity. Existing studies often focus on visual aesthetics or materiality without systematically examining handcrafting as a strategic component in shaping product identity and value. This is highly relevant,

considering premium consumers now seek products that embody visible process and high originality.

This research analyzes the role of human craftsmanship in the exploration of material and form in Ong Cen Kuang's "Bungkus" lighting collection, which creatively applies zippers using crochet techniques. Rejecting industrial aesthetic standards, Ong's work serves as an intriguing subject for further study from the perspectives of contemporary craft, exclusivity, and material/form innovation. The research contributes theoretically to the discourse on craft-based design and practically as a reference for developing handcrafted products that integrate cultural values, creativity, and unconventional material exploration.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive methodology characterized by a bounded instrumental case study framework. A qualitative-descriptive approach is selected for its capacity to provide a comprehensive portrayal of phenomena in natural settings, especially when contextual understanding is prioritized over theory testing (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Doyle et al., 2020). The method aligns well with design research where cultural, emotional, and material aspects converge through human-centered craftsmanship. The descriptive method was chosen for its capacity to comprehensively depict the role of human touch in Ong Cen Kuang's product realization process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Dudovskiy, 2022).

The instrumental case study focused on the “Bungkus” collection, inspired by traditional wrapping techniques and realized using unconventional materials—zippers—via crochet methods. This specific case was selected for its distinctive aesthetic and cultural value and its contribution to craft discourse (Stake, 1995).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed, selecting design artifacts that meet specific criteria: each object must exhibit manual production methods and demonstrate material innovation that communicates cultural or aesthetic value. This sampling method is particularly suitable for design

research, as it enables a deliberate focus on meaningful examples (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Colorafi & Evans, 2016).

Data collection techniques included visual analysis, narrative inquiry, and semi-structured interviews with the designer and collaborating artisans, allowing for rich descriptions and contextually grounded insights. The methodology emphasizes the embedded narratives within the design process, aiming to bridge the gap between theory and practice through interpretive engagement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sandelowski, 2010)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Exploration through Craft

The creation of lighting in the “Bungkus” collection demonstrates non-industrial form exploration through manual zipper manipulation. A material typically associated with fashion is transformed into expressive, dynamic lighting structures. This approach aligns with material-led design principles, where the design emerges as a direct response to a material’s properties and potential (Adamson, 2007). In Ong Cen Kuang’s creative process, materials are not mere mediums but sources of form and texture inspiration.

The “Bungkus” concept was inspired by traditional banana leaf wrapping practices in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. This cultural tradition informs a design that is simultaneously simple and complex. The manual production results in organic forms that vary from one product to another—contrasting industrial aesthetics that prioritize precision and uniformity. This variability created by artisans becomes a hallmark of artistic expression and visual identity. The repetitive crochet technique used in these pieces adds a unique tactile and visual nuance, reflecting the wabi-sabi philosophy of beauty in imperfection (Juniper, 2011).

The combination of crochet on zippers and metal frames results in lighting pieces that are both organic and dynamic. The technique allows variations in thickness and texture complexity, offering rich visual appeal. The outcome exemplifies material-led design, where the inherent material qualities shape the final form and drive creative exploration.

Eksklusivitas dan Identitas Produk Ong Cen Kuang

Ong Cen Kuang’s designs represent not only aesthetic appeal but also cultural identity and exclusivity in both process and outcome. In a design industry saturated by mass production, his products stand out as antitheses—highlighting uniqueness, meaning, and authenticity.

The “Bungkus” lighting collection draws inspiration from the banana-leaf food-wrapping tradition, resulting in a highly personal, contextual design approach that cannot be mass-produced without losing its essence.

The “Bungkus” theme transcends visual adoption and encapsulates cultural value, reinforcing brand identity. Exclusivity is not solely about rare materials but also about meaningful context embedded in the product.

As Fry notes, designs grounded in local values possess emotional durability and ethical relevance—strengthening a product’s identity (Fry, 2009). Ong Cen Kuang’s handmade, rare, slow-made, and non-repetitive products embody this ethos. Premium consumers value visible and authentic craftsmanship—beyond just aesthetics. These products serve as experiential artifacts inviting appreciation for process and time, not just function. Hence, the handmade strategy becomes a key differentiation for Ong Cen Kuang within the contemporary design industry.



Picture 1. Small Bungkus Pendant
Source: Ong Cen Kuang, 2025

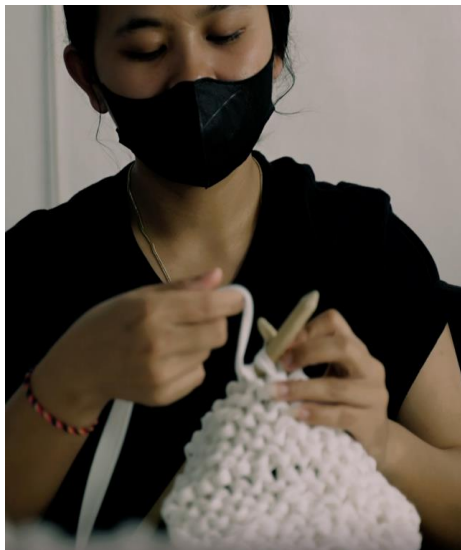
Designer–Artisan Collaboration

The collaboration between designers and artisans is not merely a production practice—it is a dialogue between ideas and hands, between conceptualization and craftsmanship. In Ong Cen Kuang's production process, collaboration bridges contemporary design with artisanal skills.

Designers contribute global narrative and aesthetic vision, while local artisans offer manual skill, material knowledge, and traditional approaches. Together, they engage in interactive and

reflective design processes. The "Bungkus" lighting products are born from joint exploration of textiles, metal, and crochet—where designers listen to and respond to local practices.

This collaboration not only results in decorative lighting but builds a design ecosystem that supports artisans, revitalizes traditional skills, and fuses cultural values with contemporary aesthetics. The products manifest as representations of creative dialogue between designers and local craftspeople.



Picture 2. The Process of Crocheting Small Bungkus Pendant
Source: Ong Cen Kuang, 2025

CONCLUSION

The form exploration in Ong Cen Kuang's lighting design reveals that design is more than function and aesthetics—it's a deep interplay between hands, materials, and narrative. Human touch, through manual craftsmanship, local artisan involvement, and inspiration from traditional wrapping practices, adds identity and exclusivity to Ong Cen Kuang's lighting products.

Imperfection from the human hand is not seen as a flaw, but as a narrative strength that brings emotional and cultural value to design. Through tactile presence, visual storytelling, and symbolic meaning, Ong Cen Kuang demonstrates that decorative lighting can serve as emotional media that authentically connects people and spaces.

Socially and culturally, Ong Cen Kuang's practice illustrates how designer–artisan collaboration can build social constructs in design, empower communities, and preserve traditional values in globally relevant formats. Academically, this research contributes to craft-based design studies by clarifying the link between manual processes and product exclusivity.

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