Abstract: Many products have historically contained an intentional narrative yet almost all products carry less obvious inherent narratives; traces of their production or of their cultural origin. Many contemporary product designers recognise and try to utilise the potential of the product narrative and the impact it may have on the end-user. This paper looks at the value of storytelling in current product design and the role of the designer as storyteller. Storytelling will be outlined through a framework comprised of Narrative, Manufacture, History and Interaction. The main body of the paper focuses on the award winning design practice of the authors’ Bernabeifreeman, in relation to a project undertaken with the Embroiders Guild, Victoria as a case study. *The Presence of Things: sense, veneer and guise* exhibition centred on the ability to embed strong historical links into the products that were designed in response to the collection of the Embroiders Guild. This paper will discuss the designers intent in the design process as well as methodologies used to embed emotional triggers in the work.

**Key words:** Product design, Storytelling, Bernabeifreeman, Embroidery, Embroiders Guild.

1. Introduction

The notion of empathy provides the means through which to understand the life experiences of others. This shift in perspective allows one to, as Atticus Finch explained in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, climb into another’s “skin and walk around in it” [1]. This idea manifests itself in a design approach in which product designers look beyond the form and usability of products and also consider the place they may occupy in an emotional sense in the life of end-users. Industrial designers Bernabeifreeman identify four methods of storytelling associated with their products various stages of realization: Narrative; concerned with precedent and concept, Manufacturing; the residual qualities of the manufacturing process, History; history of the actual object in its association with the end-user, and Interaction; identification with the product through experiential qualities. This storytelling approach is revealed by design work exhibited as part of *The Presence of Things: sense, veneer and guise* exhibition. A brief overview of the exhibition will be provided followed by a discussion of the Bernabeifreeman contribution to this exhibition, the *Ema* pendant.
2. The Exhibition

“The Presence of Things: sense, veneer and guise reinforces the social importance of public collections. Not only do they function as repositories used for historical research, they can be interpreted and used to produce new and unique works of art” [2].

The Embroiders Guild, Victoria has amassed over 3000 pieces of embroidery work and lace in their collection. In 2006 the collection formed the precedence for contemporary work created by 14 Australian designers and craftspeople exhibited under the title The Presence of Things: sense, veneer and guise. The designers and artists viewed the collection over a period of three months, selected pieces to interpret and used these as the conceptual basis for storytelling in their own work. The show sought to emphasise the importance of public collections and their multi-faceted role and in this way perhaps the very notion of the exhibition demonstrated empathy in its approach to a historical collection. Reflecting on past embroidery techniques, social upheavals that resulted in a shift away from cottage industry textiles and the female identity entwined with textiles, allowed such narratives to be interpreted and distilled into contemporary pieces.

3. Ema

“For us to develop a new product, we have to be able to justify it. It has to have a reason for being there, it had to say something new, have its own story, have its own place in the world” Rina Bernabei [3].

Figure. 1 Ema pendant light

Figure. 2 Broderie anglaise child’s carrying coat

The Ema pendant light (Figure 1) displayed as part of The Presence of Things: sense, veneer and guise exhibition, is comprised of a fabric diffuser coupled with an aluminium diffuser disc on the underside. Industrial designers’ Bernabei freeman sought inspiration in the broderie anglaise technique of a mid 1800s Child's carrying coat (Figure 2) for their Ema sample one, two, three pendants. Broderie anglaise is a “whitework” embroidery technique dated from 1820 and was popular throughout the Victorian era particularly for costume embroidery and was historically used for designs consisting of geometric patterns or “of conventionalized flowers and leaves” [4]. Visually the Ema pendant light (Figure 1) utilises a regularized geometry in its motif, alluding to the botanical influences of original broderie anglaise patterns. The strong use of precedent influencing the resulting product speaks of the Narrative storytelling approach.
The conceptual underpinning of the *Ema* pendant draws together all four storytelling techniques in its reference to the sampler. This educational tool ‘stitch-typologies’ catalogued by embroidery novices speaks of both the *Narrative, Manufacture, History* and *Interaction* storytelling methods. Bernabéifreeman put themselves in the shoes of the young needlework novices learning stitches and were inspired by both the process and the visual aesthetics of the *sampler* pieces. Figure 3 shows one such sampler held in the collection of the Embroiders Guild.

“The array of stitches that comprise a sampler can be considered as distinct individual groupings or the whole cloth as an entire composition” [5]. The sampler is importantly handmade and lovingly crafted. The *Ema* pendant whilst manufactured with industrial techniques retains a sense of individuality and the hand of the craftsperson in mass production. Figure 4 shows the pattern for machine screen printing composed to mimic the samplers and laid out in such a way as to allow each fabric shade to be cut from a different portion of the fabric. The reference to the sampler is highlighted by the juxtaposition of Figure 3 and Figure 4. This approach to the manufacturing process results in the fabric shades for the *Ema* being somewhat personalized instead of simply relying upon a design ‘repeat.’

The technique of creating broderie anglaise, “consisted of a series of cut holes, worked around in buttonhole stitch”, in a sense negative shapes on a surface edged with further stitching [6]. The manufacturing process of the *Ema* pendant therefore also alludes to the manufacture principals of broderie anglaise. The underside of the *Ema*
is a circular punched aluminium disc diffuser, powder coated white. Three discs with different interpretations of the broderie anglaise pattern were designed; the idea being that in production the end-user had a sense of individualization through the different configurations that could be combined between discs and fabric designs. For the design of these discs, broderie anglaise samples from the lace collection were reinterpreted and digitized through hundreds of different sized circular punched holes (Figure 5). These were designed in a computer drawing program, and sent via the web to the manufacturer, where a “multi-headed turret punch transferred the intricate patterning into the metal” [7]. The finished metal pieces became a series of metal laces and veils through which the light penetrates when illuminated.

Yet it is through the History and Interaction narratives that end-users can begin to attach their own stories to the product. A new wave of industrial designers have begun to recognize the importance of end-users’ attachment to mass-produced products, for “man is not only *homo sapiens* or *homo ludens*, he is also *homo faber*, the maker and user of objects, his self to a large extent a reflection of things with which he interacts” [8]. When lit the perforations on the *Ema*’s metal diffuser disc cast a shadow establishing a dialogue with the end-user and their interior environment. The shadows resulting from the punched metal become a somewhat secondary interpretation of the embroidery patterns, a temporary wallpaper cast onto the interior wall surfaces. Yet as the *Ema* was displayed in an exhibition environment its relationship with end-users was fleeting. It is within domestic interiors that this product can begin to truly develop significant History and Interaction narratives as is the case with many products.

4. Conclusions

Storytelling in product design has been outlined here and explored through a framework comprised of Narrative, Manufacture, History and Interaction. The Narrative technique deals predominately with precedence and as articulated by the President of The Embroiders Guild Janet Long, “The past is an endless repository of ideas, sourced incessantly for pearls of inspiration for contemporary contexts” [9]. During the fabrication of the product its Manufacture may also provide the ‘residue’ from which a story might be discerned by end-users. In a product’s relationship with its end-user the end-user may attach their personal stories or History and finally, through contact overtime the product may develop an Interaction narrative. Thus the dialectic of this framework considers both the design phase and the time when the product has passed from the designer’s hands to reside with end-users. These four methods of storytelling offer possible avenues for creating emotionally rich industrially designed products which may be then further personalized by end-users enabling the product to become special and integrated into an end-user’s life. However for stories to be ongoing and enduring between end-user and product, designers will need to go beyond the methods illustrated here and consider more profound or multilayered sensorial dimensions in the designing of products. Yet it is clear that the time has come to re-evaluate what products are considered to be of value in our lives and why, and thus instead of the proliferation of things begin to reassess the presence of things.

5. References and Citations


