

The evolution of craft work in the strategic development of a family enterprise

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Abstract

Research Summary: Craft firms characterized by a humanistic approach to work face a tension between adhering to pure craft principles and embracing industrialization. This challenge is heightened in family-controlled craft firms, striving to uphold tradition while adapting to change. This study examines how craft work evolves along the trajectory of entrepreneurial development through a case study of Thun, a third-generation family craft firm. We identify a set of mechanisms and four configurations—pure, technical, narrative, and ecosystemic—through which craft work evolves over time. These configurations not only preserve traditions, but also infuse them with entrepreneurial spirit, reinterpretation, and deep innovation. This study contributes to the craft work literature by moving beyond static perspectives and revealing the dynamic interplay between different craft configurations.

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Managerial Summary: Craft firms, which emphasize a humanistic approach to work, often struggle with the tension between preserving traditional craftsmanship and embracing industrialization. Our study of Thun, a third-generation family craft firm, provides practical insights for managers by identifying a set of mechanisms and four configurations—pure, technical, narrative, and ecosystemic—that show how craft work can evolve over time. Managers can use these configurations to balance tradition and innovation, and inject entrepreneurial spirit into craft processes. Our findings underscore the importance of managing this balance for sustainable competitiveness and fostering an entrepreneurial firm culture that supports both artisanal and industrial production. Our study also provides a practical guide for craft firms seeking to evolve strategically, ensuring the integration of tradition with contemporary entrepreneurial development.

KEYWORDS

craft, family firms, strategic entrepreneurship, tradition

1 | INTRODUCTION

Defined as enterprises that prioritize a “humanistic approach to work that embraces human involvement in craftsmanship” (Kroezen et al., 2021, p. 506), craft firms embody the notions of tradition, authenticity, and uniqueness that are often seen as antithetical to industrial production facilitated by machines and standardized processes (Adamson, 2013). This may create a tension in craft firms between staying close to “pure craft” and moving toward industrial production. Craft firms are therefore a particularly relevant context for examining the strategic dimensions of entrepreneurship (Ireland et al., 2023), including backward-looking (tradition as a valuable resource; Dacin et al., 2019) and forward-looking perspectives (promoting creativity, innovation, and renewal; Covin & Slevin, 2002; Ireland et al., 2003). These firms are characterized by an entrepreneurial culture that supports both advantage- and opportunity-seeking through the ability to strategically manage and coordinate resources (Sirmon et al., 2007).

The potential tension between pure craft and industrial production is even more pronounced when craft firms are family-controlled and seek to transfer their traditions, which are imbued with value and meaning derived from interpretations of the past (Dacin et al., 2019), into the future (Lumpkin et al., 2011). Craft work is a powerful transmitter of tradition and, as such, can be a means of both preserving and transforming the past (Bell et al., 2021). When family firms—that is, firms in which the family influences strategic decisions with a desire to pass it on to future generations; Chua et al., 1999)—engage in craft work as a form of “collective, knowledgeable doings” (Gherardi, 2017), each generation of family leaders plays a delicate role as custodians (Erdogan et al., 2020), creating the possibility that craft work may be steeped in nostalgia and romanticism (Holt & Yamauchi, 2018; Land & Taylor, 2014). Recent studies reflecting on the need to move beyond nostalgic craft-in-the-past (Bell et al., 2021) or pure craft (i.e., driven by a passionate commitment to preserve, construct, or revive a romanticized form of purity in making; Kroezen et al., 2021, p. 513) have started to investigate the social imaginaries surrounding craft work. This perspective



proposes forward-looking craft imaginaries to enable “forward movement that gives rise to new possibilities” (Ingold, 2010), opening up opportunities not only to preserve tradition but also to foster entrepreneurial development.

However, current research is still grounded in a static perspective of craft that lacks an understanding of how craft firms can develop strategically. To provide an alternative to viewing craft work as a resource rooted only in the past, we adopt a process perspective and examine how craft work evolves from pure to industrialized. In particular, we ask how craft work can evolve alongside the entrepreneurial development of family firms by considering craft work as a dynamic and constantly evolving process rather than a static resource that firms use to develop their competitive advantage. Drawing on primary and secondary data collected at Thun, a third-generation family craft firm that has managed to preserve its traditions over time while transitioning to industrial production, we illustrate the process by which firms strategically use craft work. Based on this revelatory case study, we identify a set of mechanisms and four configurations—pure, technical, narrative, and ecosystemic—by which craft work evolves over time, not only preserving traditions but infusing them with a new entrepreneurial spirit, reinterpreting them, and deeply innovating.

Our study makes three main contributions. First, we contribute to the craft work literature (e.g., Bell et al., 2018) by moving beyond a static view of craft work and explaining the dynamic process by which different craft work configurations relate to each other in an evolving pattern. By examining the different craft work configurations (i.e., traditional and industrialized, or technical, pure, and creative; Kroezen et al., 2021), we identify two additional configurations—narrative and ecosystemic—through which firms evolve while remaining craft-based. Second, we reveal the entrepreneurial development that enables the transformation from a family business atelier into a family entrepreneurial ecosystem (De Massis et al., 2021). Third, by considering tradition as a means to reimagine how things could be in the future, we also reveal its transformative role as a process of (re)imagination (Jasanoff, 2015) that involves not only products but also the entire entrepreneurial strategy. In doing so, we go beyond the idea of craft configurations as attributes of handmade products to encompass the spaces, processes, and relationships that surround craftspeople in their world (Bell et al., 2018; Popp & Holt, 2016).

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Craft is associated with technical excellence and mastery (i.e., manual dexterity and exceptional process-making skills; Kroezen et al., 2021) and a traditional way of making artisanal products as opposed to industrial mass production (Adamson, 2013; Suddaby et al., 2017). The craft perspective draws attention to work practices “constructed by grappling with tensions between collectively imagined pasts and futures” (Kroezen et al., 2021, p. 524). Linked to the notions of authenticity and the need for human meaning, crafters seek to convey their values, ideals, and dreams through the production of material artifacts (Bell et al., 2021; Hubbard, 2019). Craft practices tend to value tradition (Bell et al., 2021), transmit beliefs, and express identification with a shared past (Dacin et al., 2019). At the same time, unlike mechanical processes that have specific and defined tasks, craft is often characterized by the mastery of a set of interdependent techniques acquired through field experience beyond formal training (Barley, 1996). Although some characteristics are common, the way craft is interpreted can vary. In this regard, Kroezen et al. (2021) show multiple configurations of craft, ranging from pure, creative craft that prioritizes aesthetic and technical qualities to industrialized craft that emphasizes utility over aesthetics.

However, traditional or pure craft and industrialized craft are not mutually exclusive, as technological and entrepreneurial development can allow for the preservation of tradition as well as technical excellence and creative stimulation. While craft work is often described as “traditionalistic” compared to more advanced technologies and efficient ways of working (Bodrožić & Adler, 2018), even where craft has been industrialized, tradition continues to play an important role in organizational life. The craft literature offers two different views of tradition. The first sees tradition as a constraint, a static entity in opposition to modernity, blocking progress through the passive role of

custodians, that is, emotionally vested mediators responsible for connecting the past to the present (Giddens, 1994). In this view, the traditions into which people are born and to which they belong constrain their entrepreneurial actions (Dacin et al., 2019), making them prisoners of their past with traps that prevent them from innovating (e.g., Lumpkin et al., 2008). The second view (e.g., De Massis et al., 2016) sees tradition as “dynamic resources managed by active and vested participants” (Dacin et al., 2019, p. 344) who consciously transmit “beliefs and practices expressing identification with a shared past” (Dacin et al., 2019, p. 32). What binds craft to tradition is not the reference to handmade products (Bell et al., 2018), but the focus on human involvement (i.e., active custodians) and meanings. Thus, despite the dilution of craft skills and attitudes, entrepreneurial development and industrial production can still be seen as steeped in tradition.

Building on the idea that craft is primarily associated with imaginaries (i.e., “a voyaging concept”; Jasanoff, 2015) rather than static resources, a recent stream of literature has begun to explore craft imaginaries that “latch onto tangible things that circulate and generate economic and social value” (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 326), drawing attention to “people and objects... [in addition to] images, representations, meanings, values and practices” (Valaskivi, 2013, p. 486). The embedding of craft imaginaries in material things, traditions, and social interactions provides a means of cultural distinction (Jasanoff, 2015). Consistent with the view of tradition as a dynamic process, the focus on craft imaginaries signals an emphasis on materialization in the present through elements of history, tradition, place, and body, inviting a “forward-looking consciousness [that] does not ignore past experiences—it cannot shape expectations out of thin air—but it uses its experience in order to transform it” (Bell et al., 2021, p. 13).

As the literature shows (Bell et al., 2021), custodians can relate to craft imaginaries in two ways, the first characterized by nostalgia and romanticism, responding to the need for authenticity and keeping traditions alive (craft-in-the-past/past-oriented imaginary), the second characterized by creativity and openness to innovation arising from the ability to improvise (future-oriented craft imaginary). It is also the link between nostalgia and creativity in the nexus of tradition and innovation that enables continuity between past and future craft imaginations. This link is highly visible in the context of family firms, where longevity and success are based on the ability to create, maintain, and transfer traditions across generations while innovating (Erdogan et al., 2020; Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020), especially when craft is based on production processes. However, craft (family) firms are often trapped in a cage that limits their ability to industrialize production, as this would require them to abandon their craft characteristics (De Massis et al., 2016). To overcome this limitation, they need to find ways to connect past- and future-oriented craft imaginaries beyond stereotypical views of traditional or pure craft based on handmade production.

Family business research has embraced the tradition-as-a-resource perspective, using the innovation through tradition (ITT) strategy (De Massis et al., 2016) to illustrate the mechanisms that enable family firms to innovate products derived from their local and organizational traditions. First, key resources of tradition must be internalized through the identification, selection, and storage of knowledge in either tacit or codified form to facilitate its transmission and reproduction (Cowan et al., 2000). The reinterpretation of internalized knowledge then allows for the development of new products with new functionalities or meanings—new reasons for customers to buy these products (De Massis et al., 2016; Verganti, 2011). While we know that family firms can successfully use tradition as a resource to innovate their products (De Massis et al., 2016; Erdogan et al., 2020; Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020), we lack knowledge about the mechanisms through which craft family firms can evolve not only in terms of production strategies, but also entrepreneurial strategies in which traditions and craft imaginaries occupy a central position.

In craft family firms, family members act as active custodians over time, each influencing how tradition is shaped and transmitted across generations. Each successive family leader reinterprets the past, leaves an entrepreneurial legacy, and engages in strategic actions that foster transgenerational entrepreneurship (Chirico & Nordqvist, 2010; Jaskiewicz et al., 2015). These custodians, embodied by family leaders, have an identity that is strongly rooted in a deep connection to the family and the firm's history. Leaders from different generations play a custodial role in transmitting practices that manifest their connection to the past and act to preserve, protect, defend, repair, and even renew what has been handed down through the generations. This transmission ensures that tradition evolves over time (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013) as actors invent or imagine resources to meet present needs, invoking historical



nostalgia and a sense of provenance and authenticity (Bell et al., 2021), which are further reimagined for the future (Bell et al., 2021). This conscious articulation (i.e., “naming, defining and making coherent”; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998, p. 27) requires updating the traditions in the organization, making them long-lived, and increasing the activism of custodians to create, preserve, and reshape them (Dacin et al., 2019). Therefore, craft family firms provide a revelatory context for investigating the interplay between craft, tradition, and innovation in strategic entrepreneurship. In this sense, we see a need for research that thoroughly examines how different craft work configurations evolve over time to enable entrepreneurial development.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Study context and design

Given our interest in gaining an in-depth understanding of how craft work can evolve along the entrepreneurial development of the family firm, we adopted a qualitative research methodology, specifically a revelatory case study, with the intention of building theory (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). With this in mind, we selected Thun as a revelatory case of a craft family firm where the iconic creations of the artisan founder are still at the core of the business after 70 years, despite the fact that the firm has become a multinational and diversified family holding. We identified Thun as a craft family firm not only because it uses the language of craft to describe its products, but also because the spaces, processes, and relationships that engage Thun's crafters and consumers are infused with love, cultural meanings, and enthusiasm (Bell et al., 2018). Therefore, this craft family firm provides a rich empirical context to study the interplay between craft work and tradition in strategic entrepreneurship.

In the early 1950s, Countess Lene Thun, inspired by the sight of her young sons sleeping, began to mold ceramic angels in her castle in Bolzano, Italy. Her motto “bring happiness to yourself and others” guided her ceramic creations. Soon her creations (the Bolzano Angels) became popular and a symbol of the Bolzano territory, and together with her husband Otmar, she founded a business called “Officine Ceramiche Thun” (Thun Clay Workshops). In 1978, Peter, their second son, joined the business and helped to transform it from an atelier into an industrial firm while retaining a strong link with the craft tradition. When we first entered the field and started collecting data in 2018, we found that the family business was then in the process of transitioning from the second to the third generation, with Simon Thun (Peter's son) joining the business.

3.2 | Data collection

Our research is based on data collected from primary and secondary sources: interviews, semi-ethnographic experiences and archival documents (books, images, press articles). We engaged with the field since 2018, gathering multiple voices and perspectives (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014), which allowed for a better understanding of the context. Our dataset is based primarily on archival documents, including family and corporate books, photographic material (historical print advertisements and pictures of the family, the firm, the products), press release, video material that included broadcast news reports and company promos, but also artifacts, such as products that embody the distinctive style of the family business for more than 70 years. To identify media coverage and press releases we used the Lexisnexis, leading to more than 600 documents. We also analyzed the company's brochures, reports, and website, internal memos, company publications as the book “La Contessa degli angeli,” and web archives.

The semi-ethnographic data collection included site visits to the firm's headquarters, the flagship store (Thuniversum) and the family business foundation (Lene Thun Foundation), observing artifacts being formed and molded according to traditional handcraft processes, visiting the laboratories where the models are molded and baked, participating in work activities, visually recording some activities to capture the body movements of the artisans, and

TABLE 1 Data collection.

Sources	Data collection method	Description	
<i>Primary sources</i>	Interviews	CEO and Vice-president, third generation family member	4
		HR Manager	2
		Head of Communication	4
		Former CEO	1
		Sales Accountant	1
		Head of the Foundation	1
		Artisans	7
		Site visits	Thuniversum (Bolzano)
		Craft workshop	1
		Observations	Lectures and presentations
<i>Secondary sources</i>	Book	The Countess of Angels, Lene Thun	
	Archives	Website	Thun, LENET, Lene Thun Foundation
		Online archives and press releases	600+ articles, videos, presentations

informal conversations about the manufacturing processes and practices. We also participated in various seminars, lectures, and conferences organized by the firm in collaboration with local institutions.

To corroborate our analysis, we relied on the testimonies of the family firm leaders as elite and key informants (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019) who guided the recent strategic changes, as well as people involved in the production process. In the first round of interviews with firm members, we collected descriptive data on the firm's history, heritage, organizational and ownership structure, information about the family, the nature of the business, and employees. This was followed by more probing questions designed to explore the pattern by which the firm evolved from a small atelier in a castle to a multinational business. We then asked questions such as why they consider craft work so important, how they envision the business in the future, the role of tradition, and the initiatives implemented. We also focused on the firm's internal production processes and developments in relation to craft work. We collected a total of 20 interviews, each lasting between 0.5 and 2.5 h. The main interviews were recorded and transcribed and supplemented with informal conversations at business events and site visits. In addition to our interviews, we drew on secondary interviews available online and email exchanges. Table 1 synthesizes the data collected.

3.3 | Data analysis

3.3.1 | Step 1. Temporal bracketing

To make sense of Thun's 70-year timeline according to critical events in its strategic entrepreneurial development, we plotted Thun's business and family history, ownership structure, and key actors. We then bracketed the main entrepreneurship changes to facilitate understanding the progression of events and activities (Langley et al., 2013). Initially, we defined three temporal brackets according to the generations leading the firm. However, through defamiliarization (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) in the construction of the timeline (see Figure 1), we found that the overlap between generations also drove the entrepreneurial development of the family firm. Therefore, we revised our

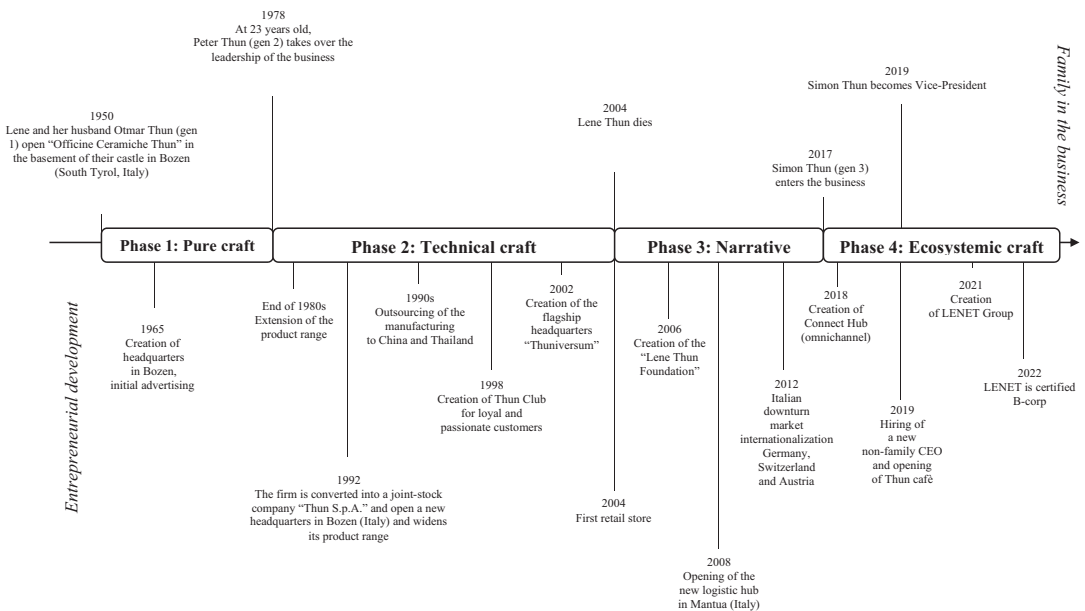


FIGURE 1 History of Thun from its foundation to today.

interpretation and identified four key phases, starting from pivotal events that marked a change in the craft production and distribution process.

3.3.2 | Step 2. Identifying the craft work configurations

We then examined the archival data and to understand the type of craft configurations corresponding to each of the four phases and explore the sources of competitive advantage in Thun. Interviews corroborate the archival accounts and enrich our understanding of the transition from one craft work configuration to another. For example, a careful examination of the visual material helped to deepen our understanding of the craft work in each phase and the synthesis in the development of new entrepreneurial initiatives (e.g., [Images 2](#) and [3](#)). In applying alternative casings (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), we realized that the first two phases were consistent with the craft literature, namely pure and technological craft configurations (Kroezen et al., 2021). However, the third and fourth phases were based on different types of craft configurations that did not match any of the categories identified in the literature, but still consistent with the craft concept. Therefore, we delved deeper into their content, examining not only the types of craft but also the role of the craftsman, the salient milestones in the firm's evolution, and the family's involvement (see [Table 2](#) for a synthesis).

3.3.3 | Step 3. Identifying transitions between craft work configurations

Given the analytical promise of craft work and the strategic entrepreneurship constructs for understanding Thun's entrepreneurial journey, we moved back and forth between these and other emerging constructs and our various data sources (Locke et al., 2008). Identifying the different craft work configurations and their characteristics at each stage allowed us to determine the evolution of craft work over time. Comparing this intuition with the literature, we realized that current studies are limited to a static view based on a configuration typology, and not on how an

TABLE 2 Craft work evolution.

Phase	Phase 1 1950–1978	Phase 2 1979–2003	Phase 3 2004–2017	Phase 4 2018–ongoing
Craft work	Pure	Technical	Narrative	Ecosystemic
Crafter role	Molder	Modeler	Storyteller	Architect
Agency at work	Hand	Creativity	Experience	Relational
Salient landmark of firm's evolution	Workshop foundation (1950) Officine Ceramiche Thun (1965)	Thun S.p.A. (1992) Thuniversum (1992) Thun Club (1998)	Thun Retail (2004) Fondazione Thun Onlus (2007) Thun Café (2017)	Connecthub (2018) Unitable acquisition (2020) Luxpets (2021) LENET (2021)
Family involvement	G1 (Lene & Otmar)	G1 (Lene & Otmar) + G2 (Peter)	G2 (Peter)	G2 (Peter) + G3 (Simon)
Core entrepreneurial initiatives	–Hand-based craft –Creation of objects –Local roots	–Wholesale –Automated manufacturing –International sourcing	–Retailing/franchising –Licensing	–Digitalization/AI Platform –Acquisitions
Competitive advantage	Creativity, art, and artisanship	Industrialization and distribution	Retailing, franchising, licensing, customer loyalty	Family entrepreneurial ecosystem, impact

TABLE 3 Mechanisms for the evolution of craft work.

	First transition (Phase 1–2) From pure to technical	Second transition (Phase 2–3) From technical to narrative	Third transition (Phase 3–4) From narrative to ecosystemic
Distilling	Ways of being	Storytelling dream world	Social impact
Diverting	Style criteria	Handmade local roots	Raw materials
Diluting	Techniques International sourcing	Retailing licensing	Digitalization
Dropping	Handmade local roots	Product focus	Brand focus

organization transitions from one craft configuration to another. Therefore, we isolated the three transitions across the phases and began to compare them through axial coding to identify the potential recurring mechanisms that allowed Thun to evolve from one type of craft work to the next. To do this, we revisited the phenomenon through additional lectures and site visits, as well as further interviews to identify the dynamics that enabled transitioning from one phase to the next. We also relied on observing the craft practices currently used in Thun and juxtaposed these with those used in the past, gleaned from artifacts, images, and archival documents. This required many iterations of data analysis and comparison for the author team to converge on the key mechanisms at play. Ultimately, we isolated four mechanisms that we label distilling, diverting, diluting, and dropping (see Table 3 for a synthesis).

While we know from the literature that it is possible to leverage tradition to develop innovative products (De Massis et al., 2016), less is known about the mechanisms through which craft work evolves not only in terms of production strategies but also entrepreneurial strategies, where elements such as materials, but also more emotional meanings, are positioned as central. In so doing, we identified the elements that were distilled and those that were dropped in the entrepreneurial journey (prominently led and governed by the family), combined with the characteristics that strategically changed to enable the entrepreneurial development of the family firm (initially led and

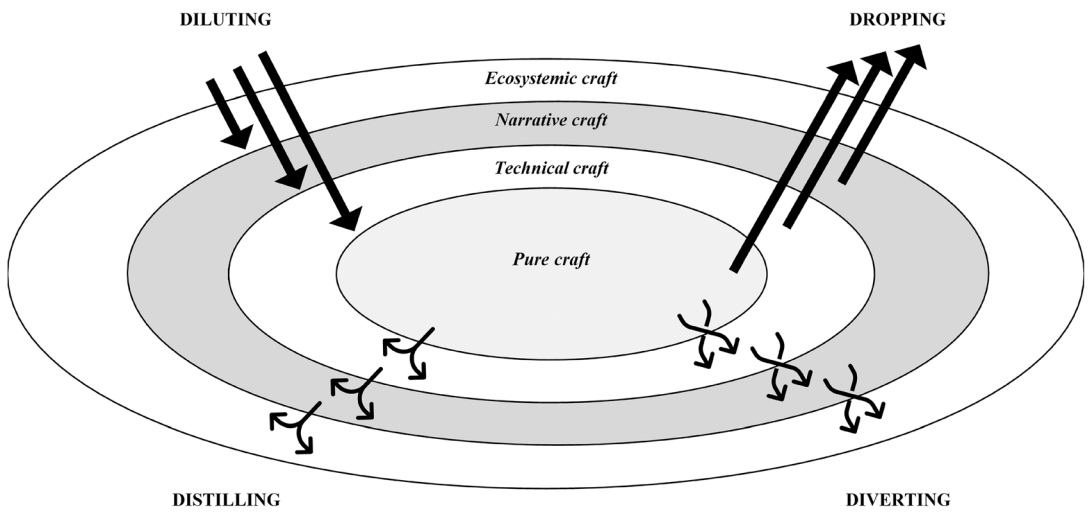


FIGURE 2 Craft work evolution in strategic entrepreneurship.

governed by the family and progressively involving nonfamily members). Starting from pure craft (Phase 1), when the elements of distinctiveness and manufacturing were bounded, we explored how the family firm maintained its distinctiveness by developing the forces and counterforces of tradition while enabling its strategic entrepreneurial development.

3.3.4 | Step 4. Abstracting the integrative model

In light of the four identified mechanisms, we revisited the data and created a semantic distance from what we tended to take for granted after the multiple rounds of analysis. The complementary processes of revisiting and defamiliarizing (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) proved critical to abstracting the interplay of mechanisms across phases into an integrative model. Finally, we integrated the findings from the four phases into a process model of how the evolution of craft work configurations enabled the entrepreneurial development of the family firm, as illustrated in Figure 2.

4 | FINDINGS

When Countess Lene set out to model her sleeping sons, Peter and Matteo, as colorful clay statues, she could not have imagined that 70 years later her workshop would be transformed into a third-generation multinational family holding, now under the leadership of her grandson, Simon. This remarkable evolution is due to the ability of the family leaders over the past seven decades to identify opportunities and competitive advantages while evolving the business to meet today's challenges. Thun's trajectory is defined by the transgenerational cultivation of individual talent within the three family leaders.

“The very first generation, the Countess, creativity was in her, she was like that. Peter industrialized that, he codified it, and put it in a box. Today we have to take it out of the box, and we have to say it can be anything as long as it respects the way of being Thun and not just the appearance. And this allows us to coexist and develop, because then there is the whole issue of diversification” (Francesco Pandolfi, CEO Thun 2018–2023).

What emerges from this revelatory case is a profound understanding of the process by which an atelier can organically transition into a comprehensive family business ecosystem while retaining its craft nature. At the heart of Thun's entrepreneurial development is its ability to refine the craft work through the adoption of practices that not only steer the firm toward an entrepreneurial future, but also firmly anchor it in the cherished traditions at the heart of its founding. In the sections that follow, we first present a chronological narrative of Thun's history, dividing its journey into the four phases in which each generation of the Thun family played a pivotal role. Within each phase, we delve into the foundational craft work that underpinned its competitive advantage. We then examine the challenges Thun faced during its entrepreneurial development and the ways in which it overcame them by adopting different craft work configurations, a process supported by a set of mechanisms.

4.1 | The evolution of Thun's craft work over 70 years

We present our findings in chronological order, showing how the delicate balance between preserving tradition and fostering entrepreneurial development unfolded in each phase, leading to the evolution of the firm's craft work. Our analysis reveals a common thread: competitive advantage in each phase deeply rooted in each specific craft work configuration. The following sections highlight the key facets of each phase and explain the nature of the craft work performed. Table 2 synthesizes the core element of each phase while Table 4 shows further illustrative secondary quotes.

TABLE 4 Additional quotes (secondary data).

Phase 1 1950–1978	Phase 2 1979–2003	Phase 3 2004–2017	Phase 4 2018–ongoing
Pure	Technical	Narrative	Ecosystemic
<p>“I am infinitely grateful for the great joy that has come to me: my work, so important to me, makes other people happy. I hope that my figures, in which I infuse all my love, will be able to find a place in the hearts of many.” Lene Thun (Thun website)</p> <p>“At night, just before falling asleep when all is silent, here suddenly my imagination, dwelling in a hidden corner of the mind, wakes up. Just when I am about to slip into the world of dreams and have already closed my eyes, a restless figure with indefinite contours often appears to me, a</p>	<p>The Thun Group, which sells the famous angels and ceramics worldwide, was among the first South Tyrolean business entities to invest in China. Tangshan Ali Ceramics, through Thun international, is an integral part of Thun World. (ANSA)</p> <p>In 1978, when he was only 23 years old, Peter took over the management of the family business, a handcrafted business producing ceramic giftware and stoves. He immediately tried to change the rules of the game. The success is explosive. By strokes of creativity and innovation, he transformed the business founded in</p>	<p>The innovative format of the “Magical World of Sonni,” a cartoon that becomes a narrative theme, combining the companies' values with the requirements of a TV and film “genre format,” was met with great success and interest among producers and buyers. Thun's handmade craftsmanship, in practice, met the drawing of Achtoons' illustrators and cartoonists until it became a cartoon inspired by the Thun world. (ANSA)</p> <p>In 2004 came the franchising network project, with the opening of the first Thun Shop single-brand store, while</p>	<p>Applying its historical customer knowledge to diversified businesses and putting the red carpet to digital. All through a strategy based on maximum interconnection between channels, markets and sectors, developed at an international level. It started from these insights the operation that led exactly 1 year ago to the birth of Lenet Group, the evolution of Thun (Il Resto del Carlino)</p> <p>In addition to the natural origin of the raw material clay, our products are characterized by great care for the material and a highly artisanal process. The staff of the partner companies we work with</p>



TABLE 4 (Continued)

Phase 1 1950–1978	Phase 2 1979–2003	Phase 3 2004–2017	Phase 4 2018–ongoing
Pure	Technical	Narrative	Ecosystemic
<p>kind of discarded sketch from my imagination that the next day I try to tadurrect into reality with clay” Lene Thun (Book, <i>The Countess of Angels</i>)</p> <p>A story that began in Bolzano in 1950, when a craft atelier saw the light in an Italy still coming to terms with the aftermath of the war. (Il Resto del Carlino)</p> <p>Roads started in Bolzano in the middle of the last century, when at the hands of Lene Thun—who modeled an early ceramic angel, watching her children sleeping—the tale of an extraordinary “fairy tale” began. (Milano Finanza)</p> <p>In the 1950s, Countess Lene with her husband, Count Otmar, began drawing “little angels” only with the idea of “giving joy and reviving childhood values” to a small niche of fans: from Bolzano, warmth and magic then enveloped the whole Italy. Success has grown over the years, and the hand of the woman who signed the company’s symbol has left the imprint. (Il Corriere della Sera)</p> <p>“When the Countess arrives at the atelier in the morning, her presence is felt even before meeting her. She would literally</p>	<p>1950 by his father and mother (who remained with him professionally until 2004) into an international brand, expands the product range. (Italia Oggi)</p> <p>In 2002, the opening in Bolzano of Thuniversum, the brand’s first flagship store (Marketing Today)</p> <p>Since Peter Thun joined the company, he has completely overturned the original business model, facing from the very beginning the challenge of not only doing business but changing the existing one. And he has succeeded because he has kept the traditional historical values but inserted the concept of business in step with the times and sometimes even a step ahead. (Corriere della Sera)</p> <p>Thun became an international reality [...], Italian leader in ceramic products and quality gifts. Every piece is a little masterpiece designed, created in Italy, with a craft passion. (Marketwired)</p> <p>“I owe everything to my parents,” he admits, “who threw me into the fray at just over 20 years old. It seemed an unconscious choice and instead it worked out.” And then he recalls, “My mother, about my joining the company, said she thought with my arrival that she had fostered generational change; she didn’t realize that instead</p>	<p>in 2008 the 35,000-square-meter logistics center was established in Mantua; in 2016 Thun from being a manufacturer became a retailer by expanding its sales network and focusing on directly operated stores, while earlier this year it opened the first Thun Caffè in Milan, in Corso Garibaldi, with a format that combines the shopping experience with catering. (Marketing Oggi)</p> <p>Each year Thun invests more than 2 percent of sales in research and development of new materials and collections, which generate an average of 50 percent of sales. This research has resulted in, for example, the bath lines, the children’s world, and home textiles. The creation of new collections also makes it possible to de-seasonalize the product: to date Thun launches four collections a year, but in 2007 the goal is to reach six launches. (Italia Oggi)</p> <p>Synonymous with “gift,” Thun ceramics have always been considered a gift of quality and craftsmanship due to the uniqueness of the product so much so that the company, in addition to the protection of registered design, has also recently been recognized by the Supreme Court of</p>	<p>to create our products follow a training and shadowing process of at least 7 months before they can operate independently, and we base our relationship with them on trust and long-term planning. The creation of the form into which the liquid clay is poured to shape the product is done manually and is repeated every 70 uses. (Impact report Lenet)</p> <p>It has come a long way, that workshop: it gave roots to Thun, a company that makes quality ceramic products and gifts with an annual turnover of more than 110 million euros. From artisan workshop to international reality, thanks to a nearly 70-year journey. (Il Giorno)</p> <p>Over the years the assortment has expanded from ceramics to tableware and the “Caffè al Volo” line, from home furnishings to women’s and children’s accessories, with the inclusion of eco-sustainable materials such as wood and bamboo. New collaborations, such as the one recently started with Trollbeads, have allowed Thun to develop the world of jewelry as well. The values of “Beautiful” and “Good,” the founding principles of Thun’s philosophy, also find their fullest expression in the</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Phase 1 1950–1978	Phase 2 1979–2003	Phase 3 2004–2017	Phase 4 2018–ongoing
Pure	Technical	Narrative	Ecosystemic
<p>vibrate with energy. Then she would put on her white gown and get to work.” Employees at the atelier” (Book, <i>The Countess of Angels</i>)</p> <p>“My mother’s creativity was boundless. But creativity alone is not enough: after the design, one must move on to the realization of the object. A stage that is taken care of by model makers and technicians who, with their experience, concretely assess what is feasible and what is not. My mother, who had the accomplished object in mind from the very beginning, was both art director and technical director. Perhaps that was what made her creations so special.” Matteo Thun (Book, <i>The Countess of Angels</i>)</p>	<p>she had let in a volcano.” Peter Thun (Marketing Oggi)</p>	<p>Cassation as having the copyright protection of industrial design for “creative character and artistic value,” which is thus protected from any counterfeiting at the international level, including from China. (Corriere della Sera)</p> <p>“Thun has transformed from a manufacturer to a retailer. Tradition and innovation in the context of evolved distribution.” (Corriere della Sera)</p> <p>In our fairy-tale world we bring to life the emotions of childhood, dreams, magic, and warmth; through our handmade products, images and behaviors, we transform them into a reality to be experienced every day bringing joy with our hearts to ourselves and others (Thun website)</p> <p>“For a company such as Thun, with a strong tradition and a product with a strong craftsmanship component, digitization and omnichannelality are fundamental” [...] “The consumer must be at the center of our strategies, especially millennials.” Paolo Denti, (Marketing Today)</p> <p>“The factories have been divested, sold, but all the pieces remain conceived and designed in Italy with artisanal passion, then made in 20 workshops scattered all over the world from Italy to Eastern Europe to Asia, the assortment has</p>	<p>activities of the Lene Thun Foundation, which has been bringing smiles to pediatric oncology hospitals thanks to its volunteers, offering a free ceramic-therapy recreational service to hospitalized children. (La Nazione)</p> <p>“Thun, synonymous with quality, style and elegance, which for more than 70 years has been present in the homes and hearts of Italians with its inimitable handcrafted creations and which, in synergy with the assets of Lenet Group, intends to adopt an increasingly omnichannel model,” Francesco Pandolfi, (ANSA)</p> <p>“With the birth of Lenet Group we have started a further evolution of our path, which finds its basis in more than 70 years of history. Today we position ourselves as an omnichannel group, which continues to develop brands and enable them for modern distribution, putting the consumer experience at the center,” Thun emphasizes, “Our roots in fact speak of care and attention to the customer during his or her shopping pleasures, particularly in the ‘gift moment’: bringing this vocation to new brands has been the mission of the last year and the results are showing. All the brands within our</p>



TABLE 4 (Continued)

Phase 1 1950–1978	Phase 2 1979–2003	Phase 3 2004–2017	Phase 4 2018–ongoing
Pure	Technical	Narrative	Ecosystemic
		expanded from ceramics to tableware, from home furnishings to women's and children's accessories, new materials such as fabric, glass and wood have been added, and the number of stores, both franchised and direct, has been increased. Until 2010 we did not have any single-brand stores: at the end of 2016 there will be 80 directly operated, 270 in franchising and 700 the multi-brands." Paolo Denti, (Corriere della Sera)	portfolio are growing." Simon Thun, (Milano Finanza)

4.1.1 | Phase 1 (1950–1978). Pure craft work

The spark that ignited the founding of Thun was Countess Lene's inspired vision of her slumbering sons. Combining her architectural expertise with passion for art and sculpture, she began handcrafting home accessories, believing that *"hands are the window of the mind"* (Lene Thun, book). [Image 1](#) shows Countess Lene molding one of her creations, which quickly captivated customers and prompted her to establish an atelier specializing in crafted clay figures. As Peter Thun, the second-generation family leader, noted:

"The company was founded by my parents: my mother was an architect and my father a lawyer. When they focused on productions like the current ones, made of three-dimensional craftsmanship, they already had the current values at the base, they simply molded them on the products. Values were their way of life and approach to others and to the market, despite coming from very different professions" (Peter Thun, 2nd generation, President).

"Thun pottery was our mother's favorite child" (Matteo Thun, Lene's eldest son)

In fact, with the support of her husband Otmar, she set up a small workshop in her hometown of Bolzano, nestled in the South Tyrol region of Italy. This region lies at the crossroads of Italian and Austrian cultures, an aspect that influenced the countess' craft work in this phase. Her style was an amalgamation of family experience and local traditions. Her family's love of nature found expression in her ceramic creations.

"Tradition represents a precious asset and serves as a rich source of inspiration. For these reasons, it's essential to build on it. However, this doesn't mean we should remain anchored to the past. For me, it's a strong stimulus to create new objects while following the path laid by tradition" (Lene Thun)



IMAGE 1 Countess Lene Thun modeling her clay angels. Source: Thun website.

“The future can only begin with a past, ours dates back to 1950 in a small ceramic workshop, and since then, we’ve spent every day creating, imagining, growing, stirring emotions.” (LENET Group introductory video)

While her figures were inspired by her own children, elements such as drapery, butterflies, ladybirds, and tulips evoked the mountains and valleys of South Tyrol. These design choices were a conscious effort to construct an enchanted realm, aiming to evoke deep-seated joy by rekindling the emotions of childhood, dreams, and warmth through her creations. The central figure in Thun's production, the Bolzano Angel, quickly became a symbol for the entire region.

“South Tyrol is a crossroads between two cultures, the Mediterranean and Central European: this is the incomparable richness of our region. It is precisely from South Tyrolean culture that I try to bring new ideas to life” (Lene Thun)

“Thun, the battleship of giftware, a story that starts with the Bolzano angels made in the image of the children by Lene, the founder, and which have become over time one of the key symbols of Bolzano craftsmanship” (Italian newspaper)

Thanks to Otmar and Lene, the products quickly gained popularity and in 1965 they opened a new headquarters in Bolzano, called “Officine Ceramiche Thun.” At first, Lene had doubts about the name, wondering if it was too grand for just the two of them. However, within a few years of opening, the office already employed 35 people. Otmar had turned Lene's passion for craft into products that could be sold.

Countess Lene Thun's craftsmanship was embodied in the motto “bring happiness to yourself and others.” From early childhood, she was surrounded by clay figurines created by her hands. This handcraft of Thun was guided by the values inherent in her lifestyle as she claims: “In my ceramic objects, I infuse soul, body, and all my joy” (Lene Thun).



4.1.2 | Phase 2 (1979–2003). Technical craft

As sales increased, it became impractical to rely solely on the handcrafting that defined Thun's early days. In the early stages, the focus was on the artist's skills, but as the business developed and transitioned to the second generation, the family firm began to embrace technical craft work. This transition revealed a significant difference in perspective between Lene and Peter, who took control of the firm. However, the enduring harmony within the family resolved these differing views by allowing the incumbent generation (Peter) to continue on his chosen path. This new era was marked by the challenges of globalization, especially for Peter, who recognized the opportunity to harness Asia's ceramic expertise for production. This led to investments in industrialization, distribution, and cost management through offshoring and outsourcing. The choice of partners in the value chain was crucial to maintaining unwavering quality, as Sarah Bazzanella, Head of Communications, emphasized:

"(...) if considering the cost of the labor of the product, either it was either to give up craftsmanship or it was a solution that could maintain craftsmanship with criteria... that is, a company has to respect the criteria here (...) maybe you choose a closer production for many reasons. You don't get porcelain in China if you have excellence in Europe anyway. (...) We want partnerships, we want collaborations, what we cannot betray is the style, the brand loyalty, the decorum, the product idea."

For 15 years, Peter's leadership not only maintained his parents' craft-driven passion, but also allowed the firm to expand its market presence. The industrialization and structuring of production together with the creation of a distribution network allowed Thun to venture beyond Bolzano to the rest of Italy and then Europe, becoming a wholesaler, as Simon Thun explained:

"It remained a craft passion for about 15 years, then they decided to start advertising, gradually expanding the business. The second generation, namely my father Peter, took over and decided to develop the business. He industrialized and structured the production by taking it out of the workshop for the first time,



IMAGE 2 Thuniversum. Source: Thun website.

into the factory, where it was possible to have control of the process. He then built up a distribution channel, at first only in Bolzano, followed by central and southern Italy and the rest of Europe.”

Peter not only focused on the product (the Bolzano Angel) but also on Thun's customers. Recognizing the need for diversity beyond angel shapes, Thun strategically diversified its product line to meet different customer preferences and access new markets. During this phase, Lena and her collaborators conceived new creations, which were then reproduced using various methods, ranging from manual to machinery. These products were molded in series based on the models crafted in the Bolzano headquarters and then hand-decorated by local and international partners. This was not only motivated by cost efficiency, but above all by the conscious selection of suppliers who would contribute to the preservation of Thun's tradition and way of life.

“Our network of suppliers guarantees the supply of products made in our style. All our products are decorated by hand. It goes without saying that it takes 8 hours to decorate a Thun product, even a small one. In Asia, the standard of decoration tends to be much higher than in Europe because they are very good at decorating. When I look at Thai temples, when I look at Hindu temples, when I look at their ideograms, their writing and whatever, they have a very developed capacity for detail. But because they learn it when they write, they are much more careful in their ability to reproduce both color and image (...) we decided to go where it was most appropriate” (Sarah Bazzanella, Head of Communication, Thun).

In the midst of this development, Thun transformed into a joint stock company in 1992. This period also saw the opening of a new headquarters in Bolzano and the creation of the innovative Thuniversity flagship store. In addition, the creation of the Thun Club in 1998 fostered customer loyalty and a sense of belonging to the larger Thun family. In fact, Peter's innovative strategic choices were rooted in the values of his territory and his family, and he felt responsible for the role of custodian of the family tradition:

“I believe I have inherited not only a small business, a brand, but also a long family history, a legacy that has lasted for centuries. Our family has almost a thousand years of history. In 1614, there were three Thun archbishops in Austria. The minister of education, Leo Thun, about a hundred years ago, left a formidable imprint on this country. This social and economic feedback lives on even now in the ‘eight ways of being Thun’, we have them in our DNA and in the sensibility with which we move and operate” (Peter Thun, 2nd generation, President)

In this way, Peter was able to turn the firm into a successful, well-known global brand without betraying the code of the Thun way. He noted that the *“DNA has always remained the same,”* as evidenced by the attention to product quality and close relationship with customers.

4.1.3 | Phase 3 (2004–2017). Narrative craft

During this period, Thun embraced not only retail, but also harnessed the power of licensing. This strategic move allowed the brand to expand beyond traditional products into lifestyle offerings that resonated with a diverse audience.

“Back then, we saw that there was such a strong attachment to the brand, and that the people who loved it wanted to have more of it every day, in every possible form” (Simon Thun, 3rd generation, Vice President and current CEO)



“We believe it is necessary to revive the excitement of childhood through dreams, magic, and warmth, through our craft products, communication, but above all through the behavior that allows us in this world to transform daily reality by bringing joy to ourselves and others” (Peter Thun, 2nd generation, President)

The enduring “dreams come true” theme remained at the heart of Thun's journey. In 2004, Thun entered the world of retail franchising, launching a chain of franchised stores that would spread its charm throughout Italy and beyond. Thun's single-brand retail stores became ambassadors of the brand's enchanting world, carefully curated to reflect Thun's core values in a clear and direct way, creating an immersive experience for visitors, and becoming gateways to the “Thun World.” Each store was designed with attention to detail, ensuring that the ambiance resonated with the essence of the brand. Thun's dedication to enchanting its audience reached new heights with the creation of the musical production “Fairytale in the Fairytale.” Created exclusively for the Thun Club, this production combined magic and imagination, bringing the enchanting world of Thun to life on the stage. This approach aimed to allow customers to enter a world of joy, imagination, and warmth with each visit, bringing the magic of its creations closer to customers. A project that could have materialized in the Thun City:

“My dream is Thun city, a project that, a short distance from the city center, would include not only the administrative headquarters and spaces dedicated to product development, but also a hotel, conference and training center, and recreational spaces, with the goal of reaching one million visitors.” (Peter Thun, 2nd generation, President—Interview at Italia Oggi, Newspaper, 2007)

Thun's strategic shift from a manufacturing to a retail model was driven by the pursuit of personalized customer experiences. The franchise model (see [Image 3](#) for an example of a Thun store) showcased Thun's dedication to nurturing connections with its audience by creating a narrative that could communicate and immerse the customer in the Thun world. This approach not only strengthened brand loyalty but also created a sense of community among



IMAGE 3 Thun retail shop. Source: Thun website.

Thun enthusiasts who started using the adjective “Thunic” to refer to the fairytale world of joy and wonder. In Peter’s words, “*The adjective ‘Thunic’ signifies joy, warmth, love, and a fairy tale world.*” However, the desire to create the “fairytale hill” in Bolzano, establishing a city dedicated to Thun fans, did not materialize and the project was scaled down. Alternatively, in line with this entrepreneurial retail strategy, Thun launched Thun Café in 2017 as a fusion of the brand’s ambiance and gastronomic delights. This novel concept allowed guests to immerse themselves in Thun World while enjoying treats. As Paolo Denti (Thun CEO from 2008 to 2018) stated:

“Thun Café, a convivial experience in the typical atmosphere of Thun objects. A hybrid retail formula. Food & beverage assortment featuring products from South Tyrol.”

In 2004, the company suffered a profound loss with the passing of Lene Thun. In her memory, Peter founded the Lene Thun Foundation in 2006 as a testament to the firm’s commitment to social responsibility. Through permanent recreational therapy workshops using clay modeling, the Foundation harnesses the therapeutic potential of ceramic craft work in the context of illness and adversity, predominantly in Italy, preserving the link with molding and handcraft.

Despite experiencing exponential growth during this phase, the entrepreneurial development did not completely take shape as planned. In terms of international expansion, in 2007 Thun announced its intention to expand into numerous European countries by 2015, starting from Spain and Portugal and extending to France, Great Britain, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia (as maintained by Luciano Roberti, CEO of Thun from 1996 to 2009, in an interview). The difficulties in conveying the passion for a niche product so closely tied to the specific taste of consumers made this goal not achievable in that period.

Thun’s entrepreneurial development included opening an additional production plant in China. The initial idea was to offshore part of the production, thus keeping everything under its own control. However, the challenges of transferring full control in such a distant institutional context convinced the family firm to opt for outsourcing activities by forming partnerships with reliable local companies to entrust part of the production to them. The delicate transition to outsourcing part of the production was possible thanks to the local mastery of molding and decoration, yet it was not possible to exert proper control over supplier’s behavior. For Thun, every product must be perfect, thus any item with even a tiny defect was withdrawn. However, those withdrawn items were sold on the black market, potentially compromising the firm’s image. An investigation in 2016 found that in northern Italy, around 20 merchants had purchased counterfeit Thun pieces from a Chinese wholesaler, which were then resold to end customers, leading the company to defend itself through legal means. This inevitably led the company to reconsider not only the technical but also the moral qualities of the commercial partners to delegate the production.

Distancing from handcraft before and industrial manufacturing later, to be more focused on retailing, Thun risked to lose competitive advantage because of counterfeiting. Nonetheless, the firm brought antagonists to court to defend its distinctive products signs. While initially the serial production was considered incompatible with the legal protection required by the company, a second trial recognized Thun’s copyright for its creations because serial productions do not exclude the unique artistic value, as acknowledged in Thun products for their aesthetic and artistic qualities. These products are indeed “*exhibited in shows and museums, featured in specialized magazines, awarded with attribution, and acquire a market value so high that it transcends that linked only to their functionality*” (Cassation Court—*verdict 7477, First Civil Section*). Through this challenge, Thun was able to set a landmark to its creations as being recognized with the copyright for its product signs and artistic value, even if industrially produced. At this stage, the distinctiveness of the products was not recognized in the handcraft or in the quality of materials but specifically in the style and symbolic references, as reported in the press:

“The seizures of products with the counterfeit Thun trademark are ordered by Prosecutor’s Office and were carried out by financiers in about 100 businesses, including retailers, wholesale and retail stores. [...] The same subjects, in the same positions, with the same artistic, stylistic solutions, the same symbolic and conceptual references, uniquely traceable to Thun.” (Press release, ANSA, 2011)

4.1.4 | Phase 4 (2018-ongoing). Ecosystemic craft

Recently, Thun has expanded beyond its own brand, as evidenced by the strategic supply chain center, which provides digital solutions to other well-known brands. This is achieved through acquisitions and partnerships with firms operating in the same or related markets, with the aim of expanding the strategic network and the range of services offered. For example, Alessio Longhini, CEO of ConnectHub, one of Thun's partners, emphasized Thun's role in orchestrating connections between people, technologies, and processes to address the digital challenges of modern commerce. As he stated:

“Through our three business units (strategic consulting, digital solutions and logistics), we connect people, technologies and processes to allow companies to face the new challenges of digitalization in omnichannel purchasing processes.” (Interview, press release)

Thun is therefore increasingly seeking opportunities in a customized approach, from logistics to packaging, from products to data management and e-commerce. Francesco Pandolfi took over from Paolo Denti as CEO of Thun in July 2018, reinforcing the family firm's omnichannel, digitalization, and internationalization goals. With this entrepreneurial strategy in mind, the firm acquired other Italian craft work firms in 2020, including Unitable, La Porcellana Bianca, Domino, Rose and Tulips and Rituali Domestici. In the same year, Thun opened physical stores in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria to increase its international presence and sales.

To orchestrate the complex articulation of the business family, the organization was architecturally structured into the LENET Group, a holding company that unites various entities under the Thun umbrella, including the original family business (Thun), newly acquired firms, the Lene Thun Foundation, and a recently established family office, fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing across the organization to support the development of the entrepreneurial family ecosystem. Managing the complexity of the holding company enabled the Thun family to expand its strategic initiatives by launching new ventures, acquiring existing ones, and expanding the current business (see [Image 4](#) for an explanation of the LENET naming).

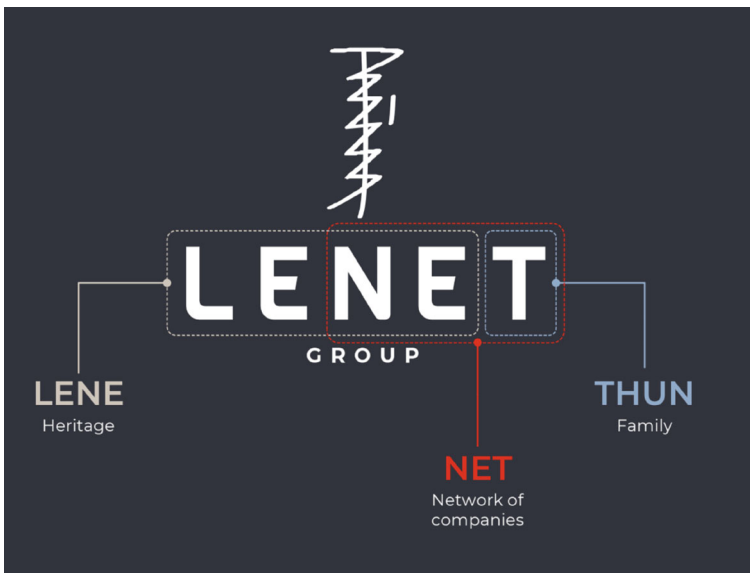


IMAGE 4 LENET. Source: Thun website.

“LENET originates from Lene Thun, the founder of the brand, but also from NET due to the significance of the platform that is built on retail, digital, and logistics capabilities. It serves the B2C market through its own brands and also acts as a partner for the B2B market” (Simon Thun, 3rd generation, Vice President and current CEO)

In line with its values, Thun expanded its focus beyond profit and embraced sustainable practices. By becoming a certified Benefit Corporation, Thun underscored its commitment to positive impact and environmental responsibility. Simon Thun, LENET's vice-president since 2019, stated:

“Our focus on managing human capital in a responsible and sustainable way, as well as on generating a healthy profit and the impact we have on the environment, is evidenced by the start of the B-Corp certification process and entry into the Elite program, both of which took place in early 2021” (Simon Thun, 3rd generation, Vice President and current CEO, interview)

Customer engagement remains a cornerstone, leading Thun to create personalized experiences across multiple channels through innovative marketing automation tools and personalized in-store interactions. Thun's evolution spanned all operational aspects, from logistics and packaging to data management and e-commerce. Strategic acquisitions of Italian craft firms enriched Thun's offering and production capability. This journey continues with a new change in leadership, as Simon Thun took over from Francesco Pandolfi as CEO. After 15 years of nonfamily CEOs, during which the firm achieved significant global growth in all areas, the family decided to regain absolute strategic control. In this scenario, Simon's accumulated experience and the opportunity to pursue an entrepreneurial legacy, combined with the pivotal custodial role that a family leader can assume, likely influenced this decision.

4.2 | Strategic entrepreneurial mechanisms for the evolution of craft work

Thus far, we have highlighted the key facts, actors, entrepreneurial initiatives and challenges that shaped Thun's history over 70 years. By examining this historical journey, we identified for each phase a specific configuration of craft work at the core of Thun's competitive advantage. However, what intrigued us and remained unclear in the reconstruction of Thun's entrepreneurial development was how the transition from one configuration of craft work to another occurred. While the phases appear almost linear, we identified specific challenges, both in terms of inter-generational conflict and risky entrepreneurial decisions that were later considered mistakes, which led Thun to change its entrepreneurial strategy by using its tradition differently.

By further analyzing our data, we identified recursive patterns across the four phases that enabled the evolution of craft work. Comparing the patterns across the phases allowed us to unveil the set of mechanisms behind the evolution of craft work, namely distilling, diverting, diluting, and dropping. In the next section, we explore these mechanisms by highlighting the role each played in the strategic entrepreneurial development of Thun across the four phases. The four mechanisms are distinct but complementary, so we grouped them into two sets (distilling/diverting and diluting/dropping). Table 3 summarizes the four mechanisms and phases.

4.2.1 | Distilling and diverting

According to this set of mechanisms, Thun identified and isolated the elements of distinctiveness that should be preserved as they were (distilling) and the elements that should be adapted and redirected to become part of the new craft work (diverting). These distilling and diverting efforts consist of identifying how the traditional practices and initiatives can make sense and become a source of competitive advantage in the current environment. Interestingly, the diverting mechanisms can redirect both current practices as well as those of the distant past.



In the evolution from pure to technical craft work (from Phase 1 to Phase 2), the Countess continued to take care of the new design creations, which were then reproduced by molding rather than hand-production. Despite this change, she remained attached to each creation and considered them her children. The increase in product range and quantity made it necessary for Thun to identify the 8 “ways of being” that represent Thun's family and business lifestyle. By distilling these “ways of being,” people could understand the meanings and values behind the objects created. While the problem of ensuring quantity was resolved with the industrialization of production, it brought the need to codify the features that distinguish Thun's essence and style. These 8 “ways of being” are: bringing joy, feeling warmth, innovating in tradition, give the best of yourself, aim for success, having respect for others, sharing and differentiating, and be customer-oriented. The intention was to recreate the transposition of a dream world that takes shape through Thun's ceramic objects.

“We believe it is necessary to revive the excitement of childhood through dreams, magic, and warmth, through our craft products, communication, but above all through the behavior that allows us in this world to transform daily reality by bringing joy to ourselves and others” (Peter Thun, 2nd generation, President)

The eight “ways of being” created in Phase 1 emerged as distinctive criteria in Phases 2 and 3 to ensure coherence with the past and convey a sense of authenticity as the firm grew entrepreneurially across generations.

“I believe I have inherited not only a small business, a brand, but also a long family history, a legacy that has lasted for centuries. Our family has almost a thousand years of history. In 1614, there were three Thun archbishops in Austria. The Minister of Education, Leo Thun, about a hundred years ago, left a formidable imprint in this country. These are social and economic feedbacks that live on even now in the ‘Eight Ways of Being Thun’, we have them in our DNA and in the sensibility with which we move and operate” (Peter Thun, 2nd generation, President)

Emerging from our data is that the craft work that belonged to Phase 1 was diverted into modeling in Phase 2, taking on a narrative form in Phase 3, always maintaining the same style but adapting to the changing organization that diverted from entirely handmade products.

“The product has an original style, it is not in fashion. We do not follow the ‘made in something’ but we pursue the ‘made in Thun’. Our style is recognized by the roundness of the products, in the three-dimensionality and polychromy and in the unnatural expression, typical of a fairytale world (...) It has nothing natural. It is, in fact, a dream. Like any of our products. It represents warmth, magic, the will to live” (Peter Thun, 2nd generation, President)

Similarly, the local roots that to some extent had been dropped in Phase 2 found new light through diverting in Phase 3, when South Tyrolean products were sold in the Thun Café to enhance the immersive experience of the Thun world. Consistently, the transition from technical to narrative craft work (from Phase 2 to Phase 3) involved the mechanism of distilling the telling of the Thun fairytale and its dream world based on joy and wonder. This transition was marked by the realization that being a craft-based firm goes beyond the handmade idea associated with the product. As a result, Peter and Simon became increasingly concerned that the craft product was detrimental to growth and innovation if not accompanied by meaning, a way of doing things that coherently encompasses every sphere of the firm.

Our evidence shows that Thun still associates its brand with a story and a positive experience related to South Tyrol. For example, since negative thoughts are not allowed, Thun never proposes witch figures, not even for Halloween.

“Some Halloween symbols are not used and could not be used in our brand. Some say that we lose business opportunities. The thoughts are always positive. You propose a product of affection. And in the end, that's the great strength, the promise that our product makes” (Sarah Bazzanella, Head of Communication)

As the business developed (from Phase 3 to Phase 4), the narrative craft evolved into ecosystemic craft by distilling the desire for positive social impact, particularly pursued by the third generation of the Thun family.

“I would like to contribute as an entrepreneur to future generations. I think we are all here for the benefit of others, and I think my generation, our generation, has certain duties to fulfill in life. While the previous generation looked at many factors in a capitalistic, very liberal way, we need to broaden our views and our spectrum to include more aspects than just profit. I also think that each has to add value, but also be relevant to the current situation they find themselves in” (Simon Thun, 3rd generation, Vice President and current CEO)

“I think that's a vision we should all keep in mind when we build something. The goal cannot be just to make profit, but to engage the community, using your existing structure and building value around it” (Simon Thun, 3rd generation, Vice President and current CEO)

To this end, the foundation has played an important role in terms of keeping the use of handmade practices alive while generating positive social impact.

“In recent years, the Foundation has really taken on a vital role in our entrepreneurship model. I think this is a unique aspect of a family business. We are not here to prove anything to investors or the market. We are here to make sure we can pay our employees a fair wage, but also to leave a better mark on the world” (Simon Thun, 3rd generation, Vice President and current CEO)

Another diverting initiative took place around 2017, when Thun relaunched its loyalty program with the goal of reaching new customers who wanted to connect and interact with the brand in a more digital way. Loyal customers can collect points and rewards, engage with the firm on social media, attend events, and receive discounts, promotions, and other benefits. The aim is to reward customers when they purchase a Thun product and encourage them to remain loyal to the brand. This loyalty program is an innovative project that allows evaluating customer loyalty and increasing engagement and exposure to the brand. In addition, this loyalty has allowed the family business to win the prestigious Super Brand Award in 2018 and 2019, recognizing Thun's continued respect for tradition, sustainability, and innovation. Finally, the focus on products, which was lagging in Phases 2 and 3, was diverted in Phase 4 when the multiple acquisitions allowed LENET to position itself as a group focusing on real raw materials and craft, with an emphasis on ceramics, wood, paper, and wool.

4.2.2 | Diluting and dropping

In the pursuit of entrepreneurial development, Thun had to engage in additional activities. This opportunity-seeking effort was implemented by diluting elements of the past with new elements offered by current circumstances while dropping others. Surprisingly, the selection of elements to be diluted and dropped was not without its challenges, both in terms of emotional affection for some practices and intergenerational conflict over the need to reduce and get rid of some of the elements that had made the firm successful over time.



These mechanisms led to new opportunities, from technology to business strategy. For instance, the transition from pure to technical craft work (from Phase 1 to Phase 2) was enabled by new techniques that allowed reproducing the models without the need to mold unique pieces by hand. A key example is the decision to drop the handmade element of production in favor of modeling and designing prototypes that were then reproduced. The decision characterizing the transition to technical craft was promoted by Peter but was challenged by Lene, who was the artist and wanted her products to be unique pieces of art rather than multiples. This transition highlighted a significant difference in perspectives between Lene and Peter, who took control of the company. However, the enduring family harmony effectively reconciled these differing perspectives, allowing Peter to pursue his opportunity-seeking behavior and different interpretation of tradition.

Peter started exporting Thun products from Italy—mainly to German-speaking countries, such as Austria and Germany—and developed international brand awareness. While growing in the market, he also decided to take some distance from the local roots by offshoring production to China, Thailand, Bulgaria, and Romania. This was a very risky decision, because the greater the output, the greater the risk of distorting the firm's essence and tradition. These entrepreneurial decisions made it imperative to figure out how to keep these characteristics in the organization while diluting some core aspects. In this regard, Peter saw China as the most advanced country in terms of craftsmanship quality and techniques. He therefore decided to set up a production plant in China, 100% owned by Thun, following the same production processes as in Bolzano, using raw materials from Europe, molded and hand-decorated, finally quality controlled first in China and then in Italy.

“We have been producing in China for 20 years and I can say it with confidence: China is the most advanced country when it comes to ‘handmade’. Confucius and Chinese culture have shaped a citizen who is very attentive to money, of course, but also to quality” (Peter Thun, 2nd generation, President)

However, international expansion has not been without obstacles and mistakes. Challenges included counterfeiting and difficulties in protecting intellectual property, as well as lack of preparation in exporting to distant countries, especially in Phase 2. Thun tried to enter in the Chinese market without adapting the business model, an unsuccessful attempt that costed it dearly and led it to later revise its export approach, returning to China only almost a decade later.

“We thought we could copy and paste the success we had in Italy, thus thinking of reducing time and investments, but we were wrong” (Peter Thun, 2nd Generation, President)

As a result, in the second transition, from technical to narrative craft, the dream world of Thun was diluted into a wider range of businesses including retail shops and partnerships with other firms, which allowed the product range to be expanded for export, including licensing, for example, games, children's clothing, and jewelry.

“We are no longer associated with collectable gifts, our products today represent a lifestyle [...] we did so by investing in brand extension and licensing. The novelties in the field of brand extensions and licenses start with the woman [...] The woman, however, is very often also a mother, so here is the new children's collection of rompers, accessories, and soft toys produced under license” (Paolo Denti, Thun CEO 2008–2018)

During this phase, Thun realized that there was such a strong attachment to the brand that the people who loved it wanted more of it in every possible form.

“You have to be the best at something. So, from a craft enterprise to an industrial enterprise to a retail enterprise to a media content company. We have to generate content, then who's going to produce, who's going to distribute, it's that intersection of channels and market that makes it adaptive” (Francesco Pandolfi, Thun CEO 2018–2023)

At the same time, Thun dropped its wholesale business and diluted its focus from being primarily product-driven, seeing the greatest opportunity in the retail model. These decisions were not without tension, as the two nonfamily CEOs were hired and fired during the transition.

“Today, the Thun angels represent only 0.5% of sales, a marginal part of our turnover. On the other hand, they have immense value. You can compare it to the Porsche 911, which accounts for only a small percentage of total sales and is still the flagship of the automotive brand” (Simon Thun, 3rd generation, Vice President and current CEO)

With the creation of the LENET Group—which includes the Thun, Teddy Friends, La Porcellana Bianca, Rose & Tulips, Rituali Domestici, Luxpets, and Connecthub brands, as well as the Lene Thun Foundation—the focus is no longer on the end product alone, but also on the goal of creating “unforgettable shopping experiences” by combining retail, logistics, and digital experiences. In this transition, the wider architecture of the LENET group required Thun to dilute its focus on individual brands by adopting an integrated approach aimed at providing its customers with a solution addressing the entire shopping experience (retail, logistics, and digital). By seizing this opportunity, Thun transitioned from Phase 3 to Phase 4 where the craft work evolved from a narrative to an ecosystemic configuration. The further dilution with digitalization and artificial intelligence allowed the firm to extend its core competencies beyond B2C to B2B.

“We created a logistics center, we digitized it, and we realized the efficiency achieved. So we asked ourselves, why not make it available to other companies?” (Simon Thun, 3rd generation, Vice President and current CEO)

This entrepreneurial shift also allowed fulfilling the customer-centric way of being, enabling the firm to respond more resiliently to the external shock caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The LENET Group was created as a strategic platform that brings together all the companies under its control to create a synergistic network of firms offering omnichannel products and services to reach and satisfy the largest possible number of customers. The aim is to integrate the past and the present by creating a synergistic network of companies, customized products and services, preserving Thun's history by supporting the omnichannel potential of each brand. At the same time, the custodial role embodied by family leaders from different generations has played a crucial part in assuming responsibility for the transmission of craft practices that actively reflect their connection to the past. They work diligently to preserve, protect, defend, mend, and rejuvenate what has been passed down through generations. This process ensures that tradition continues to evolve. The preservation of tradition relies on the nuanced interpretations of these custodians, which is why Thun decided to return to a family CEO, despite the 15 years of nonfamily CEOs that positively impacted the firm's entrepreneurial development.

Overall, Thun's evolution over the past 70 years from a small, purely artisanal atelier to an omnichannel ecosystem shows how tradition is best preserved precisely by continuously incorporating craft work not only at the product level, but especially at the strategic entrepreneurial level, using specific mechanisms.

5 | DISCUSSION

The craft perspective has received increasing attention in entrepreneurship research in recent years (Bell et al., 2021), reflecting the efforts that craft firms are increasingly making to preserve their traditions alongside their entrepreneurial development. However, by emphasizing craft work in relation to specific production processes, research has overlooked the fact that craft can be embedded in organizations and organizational fields not only through one configuration or another (i.e., traditional, industrialized, technical, pure, or creative; Kroezen



et al., 2021), but also through the evolution between configurations, incorporating different types of craft work. In an effort to explain the entrepreneurial development of a craft family firm that managed to preserve its traditions over time while transitioning to industrial production and global expansion, we identified the mechanisms by which craft work evolves across configurations.

As a process, craft work evolves through four phases driven by the interaction between the family, the firm, and the entrepreneurial initiatives. In the transition from one phase to the next, the craft work and the role of the crafter change while remaining relevant sources of competitive advantage (see Table 2). Based on an in-depth study of the evolution of craft configurations in Thun, a family firm that has been able to maintain its artisanal nature over time, we identify recurrent mechanisms that we analytically unpack in the process illustrated in our model in Figure 2. Specifically, the model depicts the process by which craft work evolves from pure to technical (Phase 1), from technical to narrative (Phase 2), and from narrative to ecosystemic (Phase 3). Enabling these transitions are two sets of mechanisms: distilling and diverting (depicted in the model as operating within the boundaries of the firm), and diluting and dropping (depicted as operating across boundaries). When these mechanisms are in play, specific elements move around the organizational setting, creating a shift in the way craft work occurs.

In particular, we found that a first set of mechanisms is used to identify and single out the traditional elements that have meaning (distilling) and those that need to be adjusted and redirected to become integral components of the new craft work (diverting). This distilling and diverting effort entails recognizing how traditions can be meaningfully transformed into a source of competitive advantage in the present context. Interestingly, the diversion mechanism can realign not only elements that are in the process of emerging, but also those that are rooted in the past, such as the handmade practices. The second set of mechanisms is used to identify opportunities and involves a process of combining elements from the past with new elements across boundaries that emerge from the current situation, while at the same time abandoning certain elements. However, the process of deciding which elements to combine and which to omit can be challenging due to emotional attachment to specific practices and intergenerational disagreements about the need to minimize and discard certain components that have contributed to the firm's historical success. As a result, these mechanisms require negotiation among the crafters (i.e., custodians). Combined, the two sets of mechanisms allow for an evolution of craft work in which the crafter also moves from being a molder to being a modeler, a storyteller, and finally an architect.

The first two configurations identified in our study are pure craft work (i.e., associated with the radical prioritization of human skills and attitudes at the expense of anything considered mechanical; Kroezen et al., 2021, p. 519) and technical craft work (i.e., described as a balance between human and machine forces, and despite the increasing reliance on machines, crafters are still autonomously involved in crafting while maintaining control over machines; Kroezen et al., 2021, p. 518). While these configurations have been theoretically explained in the literature as specific types of craft work, there is no explanation of the process of transitioning from one configuration to the next. Through our investigation, we identified two new configurations of craft work, namely narrative and ecosystemic, and show how the overall evolutionary process of craft work changes from a pure to an ecosystemic configuration. In doing so, we aim to move beyond the idea of craft as attributes of handmade products to encompass the spaces, processes, and relationships that surround craftspeople in their world (Bell et al., 2018; Popp & Holt, 2016).

In particular, the configurations in phases 3 and 4 appear to be new to the craft literature. We introduce narrative craft work as a configuration of elements that reconcile the tension between past traditions and future opportunities by embedding stories of the past in new products, services, and business models, thus offering consumers the opportunity to own objects that immerse them in another world, a story that will last forever. In our case, for example, we observed that a narrative craft work configuration is adopted when it appeals to the most nostalgic aspects of fantasy and dreaming of an enchanted world outside of the reality of modern industrial modes of producing soulless goods. This explains how the opportunity for a more promising future does not come from dismissing the past, but from seizing the opportunity to embrace and enhance the valued aspects of tradition. Through narrative craft work, entrepreneurs harness long-lasting positive emotions, and in the process, persuade consumers to bring the dream world into their lives. This adds to recent debates on the entrepreneurial perspective of an idealistically

imagined future that has the potential to reinforce the most favorable elements of a wistful past characterized by meticulously crafted, high-quality products (Suddaby et al., 2023).

We argue that firms strategically use narrative craft work configurations to propose entrepreneurial strategies embedded in a coherent and permanent narrative of the past that both workers and consumers use to provide explanations for their actions. This sense-making is also facilitated by marketing narratives that highlight the involvement of craft workers in the creative process, often accompanied by aesthetically pleasing representations of the history of the craft objects and the artisans themselves. In this way, the meaning of craft is constructed not only through the physically crafted item but also through the consumption of the craft worker's visual, written, and oral representations. In this regard, the custodial responsibility of family leaders across generations is fundamental in preserving and revitalizing practices that vividly reflect their historical ties, ensuring the continued evolution of the tradition.

Second, we present ecosystemic craft work as a configuration in which traditions are used to create competitive advantage. Inspired by Autio and Thomas' (2013, p. 3) definition of innovation ecosystems as a network of "interconnected organizations, organized around a focal firm or a platform, and incorporating both production and use side participants, and focusing on the development of new value through innovation," we argue that ecosystemic craft work is a configuration organized around a focal firm or platform that focuses on the development of new entrepreneurial opportunities through the use of tradition (rather than innovation, which is more of an outcome than a resource). For example, the establishment of the LENET Group in our case study shows that Thun functioned as a focal firm embedded in a wider platform consisting of an interorganizational system sharing tradition, where craft becomes an emergent property of the system itself. Each of the group's products is the result of a craft work process, even if not based on purely handmade production. Taken together, the four craft work configurations show how firms can still maintain their craft base as they turn to industrial production (Bell et al., 2021; Popp & Holt, 2016), incorporating but not losing previous configurations.

5.1 | Contributions

Considering the evolution of craft work as a source of competitive advantage that enables entrepreneurial development, our study makes three main contributions. First, we contribute to the craft work literature (Bell et al., 2018) by showing the process through which different craft configurations relate to each other in an evolving pattern. Adding to Popp and Holt's (2016) argument that craft and industrial production can reinforce each other in a single practice rather than exclude each other, our study reveals two new craft work configurations—narrative and ecosystemic—highlighting these not as individual types but as complementary and interdependent configurations through which firms can embrace industrialized production practices while remaining craft-based.

In doing so, we also extend research that has paid too much attention to the role of the hand and the body in craft work (Bell & Vachhani, 2020). Handwork is the "heterogeneous gestural system of corporealities and materialities" that enables the form of an object and gives meaning to the idea of making (O'Connor, 2017, p. 228). Building on Bell et al. (2021), we understand craft work not only as involving the use of hands, but also as grounded in ethical, sensory, and affective encounters, including imaginaries of the past and the future, of an atemporal dream world. This strengthens the argument that the embodied skills required to perform craft work are not only related to a bodily or material aspect. We extend this line of work by empirically demonstrating that craft work cannot be limited to the qualities and characteristics of small-scale handmade products, but should be examined as a process in which the spaces, processes, and relationships surrounding artisans and their environment interact, blurring the line between craft and industrialization.

Second, our analysis suggests that opportunity seeking occurs through the four identified mechanisms that enable the evolution of craft work. These mechanisms highlight the temporal (e.g., involving the past, present, and future) and multilevel (e.g., involving the individual, family, and organizational levels) process dynamics that characterize craft work and lead to the generation of competitive advantage. Our research provides an opportunity to



examine strategic entrepreneurship in a historically craft-based venture, which remains largely overlooked (Cattani et al., 2017). While the literature recognizes the need to study how firms create and exploit new opportunities through competitive advantage (Hitt et al., 2011; Ireland et al., 2003), we know little about how tradition can be a dynamic resource for entrepreneurial development. We explore the role of tradition in the strategic entrepreneurship of craft family firms by focusing on entrepreneurial development. In doing so, we also cross the boundaries of the ITT strategy, which classically refers to new product development (De Massis et al., 2016).

The possibility of reinterpreting tradition suggests a close link between tradition, craft, and imagination. Considering tradition as a means of reimagining how things could be in the future reveals its transformative role as a process of (re)imagination (Jasanoff, 2015) that involves not only products, but also the entire entrepreneurial strategy. Thus, we extend the tradition as resource perspective by embracing the trans-temporal nature of tradition (Giddens, 1994) as a powerful influence on the present, ensuring that the future is connected to the past. In the particular craft work configurations observed in our long-lived family firm, craft imaginaries were constituted primarily by references to tradition, such as past events, personalities, artifacts, and techniques. The notion of craft imaginaries emphasizes that these references are simultaneously bounded and inform the projection of new possibilities, as actors entrepreneurially reuse and recombine elements of the past to create new products, but also brands or other organizations and entrepreneurial initiatives, such as foundations and family offices.

Finally, we offer implications for the entrepreneurial family ecosystem debate (De Massis et al., 2021). The notion of ecosystems has gained widespread popularity in entrepreneurship research on how to foster the development of innovative products and services, create opportunities, and enhance competitiveness (Acs et al., 2017). Our aim is to bring to the forefront the notion of entrepreneurial ecosystems as a means of depicting and elucidating how craft entrepreneurs, as economic agents, engage with their environment in ways that enable productive entrepreneurship (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). Our study examines the evolution of a craft atelier into a complex system of organizations in which the entrepreneurial family coordinates the activities, synergizes resources, and achieves multiple goals by allocating them to specific types of organizations (e.g., family-managed firms, family-controlled firms, foundations, family offices). Therefore, building on research that decenters the individual entrepreneur as the sole locus of value and opportunity creation, we emphasize the importance of situating the craft work phenomenon within a broader entrepreneurial context that includes temporal, spatial, social, familial, organizational, and market dimensions (Zahra, 2007; Zahra et al., 2014). The framework inherent in family business settings refers to the extent to which activities are influenced by the intricate layers of their ecosystem, which in turn are influenced by factors such as family emotions and traditions, entrepreneurial mindsets, and individual and shared goals. In doing so, we corroborate the cross-fertilization between craft-based research and the entrepreneurship and family business literature (Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020).

5.2 | Limitations and future research directions

Our study is based on an in-depth analysis of a single case. While this has allowed deeply investigating the mechanism related to the phenomenon of interest, external validity is constrained. Therefore, we suggest further research on the link between tradition, craft work, and family firms to determine whether there are moderating factors that allow tradition to be used as a dynamic resource for strategic entrepreneurial development. Moreover, our revelatory case is located in South Tyrol, at the intersection of two cultures, Italian and Austrian. Other cultural contexts could reveal whether and how national culture shapes the influence of firm tradition and craft as well as its effect on strategic entrepreneurship. Furthermore, by linking the strategic entrepreneurship, family business, and craft literature streams, we help explain how craft work is continuously mobilized to create competitive advantage through complex social connections (Endrissat et al., 2015). This process depends on a cultural production mechanism in which symbolic and emotional meanings also play a central role, both in the creation process (Thurnell-Read, 2014) and in the act of consumption (Mearns, 2014). Indeed, craft producers and consumers often convey their strong affection for

objects, expressing deep enthusiasm for both making and buying them (Endrissat et al., 2015). Thus, we encourage further research on the role of emotional meanings in craft family and nonfamily firms. Finally, while we studied a family firm and demonstrated the strong influence of the family as a custodian of tradition in guiding entrepreneurial development, the link between craft and tradition may also be relevant in nonfamily organizations. Therefore, future studies could examine whether and how traditions are preserved in these contexts, and whether they are an asset or a liability for entrepreneurial development.

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