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Craft and Design

Although craft and design are two different concepts, they are closely linked: craftpersons generally engage in design and the mass production of designed goods frequently relies upon craft processes. The word 'craft' means 'skill', particularly the manual kind, hence 'handicraft'. It also means 'trade' or 'occupation'. Familiar, traditional crafts include: pottery, furniture-making, leatherwork, metalwork, stone masonry, jewellery, glass-blowing, stained glass, embroidery, knitting, weaving, tapestry, book-binding, basketry and toy-making.

Historically, craft preceded both art and design. During the Middle Ages in Europe, art and design had not yet emerged as separate specialisms, but were subsumed within the broad range of workshop skills. In the modern period one of the key differences between craft and design is that in the former, the making process from conception to execution is undertaken by the same person or a small team of people. A division of labour between designers and makers, in other words, does not exist – or not to the same extent – as it does in industry. A second difference is that the handicraft mode restricts output to one-off artefacts or small batches of goods. Craft production usually takes place in studios or workshops (even in kitchens and garages), whereas designed goods are generally made in factories. Craft objects generally exhibit the mark of the hand, whereas industrial goods generally exhibit the mark of the machine. (This is not to say that craftpersons don't use machines; potters use wheels and kilns, knitters use knitting machines, and so on.) Divisions of labour also occurred in medieval and ancient workshops. It was the gradual introduction of more intensive labour divisions, power-driven machinery, assembly lines, and growing automation which brought about the separation of craft and design and which prompted the well-known debates about the fate of

art and craft in the age of mechanical production and reproduction.

Factories enabled the mass production of millions of identical units and since this mode of production is the dominant one within contemporary developed countries, the crafts necessarily appear today as residual phenomena, anachronisms or survivals from the past. The less a society is developed industrially and technologically, the more it relies upon crafts in everyday life, hence they continue to play an important role in Third World countries. Within advanced societies, in sharp contrast, crafts tend to be part of the luxury and gift markets. First and Third worlds come together in the craft products made by the poor for affluent foreign tourists, that is the so-called 'ethnic', 'tourist' or 'airport arts'.

It might seem that the destiny of the crafts is to vanish altogether. One category of craft - the so-called 'rural' or 'country' crafts based upon the agricultural way of life - has certainly been virtually eliminated. However, the crafts are unlikely to disappear completely because they continue to play a useful role during the preliminary stages of industrial production, as in the case of model-making which is used to generate prototypes. Furthermore, craft revivals take place periodically as a consequence of reactions against cheap, standardized, machine-made consumer goods. Expensive, individualistic items hand-made from fine materials have a strong appeal, particularly to that middle-class sector of society which can afford the higher prices and which wishes to distance itself from the majority dependent upon the mass market. To be fair, the attraction of craft is not simply social snobbery. A different set of values can be involved: truth to materials, a desire for natural as against synthetic materials, a respect for skill or workmanship, the role of the imagination and the unity of mental and manual labour. Nostalgia for a simpler, smaller-scale, more rural existence is also part of the appeal of craft.

David Drew, a basket-maker, lives in a thatched cottage in Somerset. He grows 20 varieties of the willows which serve as his raw material. He learnt basket-making like an apprentice

from another craftsman. The almost mystical quality of craftwork is indicated by the following quotation:

> My baskets have to be strong and neat, made from willow alone, and then, if they are well treated, they can last 40 years. I have to have the design clear in my head before I start because I can't unpick - it's not like knitting. From the first cut to the last trim the work should be carried out with total concentration; it should proceed in one movement and if it's not clean and good I destroy it.[1]

It appears from these remarks that Drew does not design on paper. Craftspeople are obviously inventive and design is a vital stage in the craft process but it is also the case that precedent is crucial: traditional patterns, types and forms are followed - with minor variations - time and time again. Copying other people's designs has also been a common practice in many trades.

Within the spectrum of the crafts a hierarchy can be discerned. At the bottom there are the trades of building - bricklaying, plastering, plumbing and carpentry - and at the top crafts aspiring to the condition of fine art. In the former there is normally little scope for creativity and self-expression, whereas in the latter these flourish. A bricklayer's status is usually that of an employee, while an artist-craftperson's status is that of someone who runs a small, independent business. Akin to the lowly building trades are those crafts and hobbies associated with the house and housewives: sewing, knitting, curtain-making and so on. Domestic crafts tend to be part-time and amateur, though in some cases they develop into full-time, professional activities.

Artist-craftpersons think of themselves above all as creative, inventive beings. Like fine artists, they experiment with materials, techniques, forms, colours and imagery. Since the aesthetic dimension is all important, the functional aspects of their artefacts tends to have a lower priority. Like the portrait painter, much of their work is undertaken on the basis of individual commissions. In Britain many such people studied at art school and then acquired a postgraduate qualification at the Royal College of Art. As a sign of their different status from producers

for the mass market, they hold one-person exhibitions in public and private art galleries and they sell their wares via specialist, upmarket stalls (like the ones in the covered spaces of London's Covent Garden) and shops. One such shop exists within London's museum of the applied arts – the Victoria and Albert. There are also several specialist magazines which review craftwork in much the same manner as art magazines review fine art. In Chelsea a crafts fair, organized by Philippa Powell, takes place annually which serves as a showcase for contemporary British crafts. Some craft objects become collector's items and end up in auction houses being sold for high prices. George Daniels, a British clockmaker, takes a year to construct one of his watches; they cost over £50,000 each. Even he acknowledges that they are 'rich men's toys'.[2] However, most professional craftpersons have annual incomes lower than the national average.

As Peter Dormer explains, many people – more women than men – have been attracted to the crafts in recent years because they wanted an alternative lifestyle, one with a high degree of work satisfaction and self-determination. However, he also points out that 'in reality craftspeople are dependent upon state patronage via the Crafts Council and the regional arts associations, school teaching and a clientele of salary earners or professional workers. The autonomy, like that of any small-scale entrepreneur, is fragile, albeit greater and more enviable than that available to most people.'[3]

Mention of the Crafts Council reminds us that various organizations and institutions are active in the promotion of the crafts. Others include the Cornwall Crafts Association and the British Toy Makers' Guild. The presence here of the word 'guild' is a sign of the link between present-day craft and the medieval past.

It is the small scale of craft production which ultimately distinguishes it from industrial manufacture. Achieving the right scale for economic viability is, however, difficult. A business run by one person is very demanding: the same person has to make, distribute and market the wares and keep accounts. Low output means high prices and lengthy production times. The goods may prove too expensive to sell. Increased production can reduce unit costs but by enlarging the workforce, introducing

further divisions of labour, and making use of machines, the high quality and uniqueness of the craft object may be put at risk. If expansion is too great the special appeal of the craft can be lost as production comes closer and closer to outright industrial manufacture. Nevertheless, there are a number of successful artist-craftpersons who generate designs for others – outworkers or workshops – to make up. (This was the kind of production William Morris engaged in.) There are also ceramics factories where craft skills – handpainting, for example – still persist. In short, in the space between craft and industry various intermediary stages of manufacture are to be found.

Although the crafts are much less important in economic terms than industry, their contribution to national economics is not insignificant. It varies, of course, from country to country. Germany has a tradition of encouraging what is called the 'Handwerk' sector; consequently, its contribution to the German economy was two and a half times the size of its British equivalent, employing about 3.4 million people and making up 11 to 12 per cent of gross national earnings (1984 estimates).

Craft has been regarded as a half-way house between art and industry. At times it manifests uncertainty about its identity and its public image can be a negative one. This is because so much craftwork is of poor quality – tat or kitsch – and because it can also suffer from whimsy and preciousness. To enthusiasts of the city and the machine age, the taste for crafts appears regressive and elitist. More recently, however, the development of computer-aided design and manufacturing has suggested to some observers that a new kind of product responsive to consumer demands, capable of economically viable small batch or even one-off production, is now possible and that this will finally resolve the conflict between craft and industry.

Contemporary design historians tend to be ambivalent towards the crafts. Those inclining towards a strict definition of industrial design ignore them altogether. Historians of the Modern Movement, like Pevsner, feature crafts – that is, William Morris and the British Arts and Crafts Movement – as a stage in the development of modern design. A substantial body of literature on Morris and

the Arts and Crafts Movement exists in its own right, and a separate history of the crafts has been written by Edward Lucie-Smith (he has also written a companion volume on industrial design).[4]

Perhaps the most famous and delightful account of an English craft - wheelwrighting - is George Sturt's *The Wheelwright's Shop* (1923). The author's family ran a small business in Farnham, Surrey, making and repairing waggons for local farmers and tradespeople throughout the nineteenth century. Sturt was not himself trained to be a wheelwright but he undertook many of the tasks about the workshop. Having literary ambitions, he was an acute observer and his descriptions of the materials and tools used, the methods employed, and the habits of his eight workmen is detailed and perceptive. His story also traces the slow decline of the trade and its associated lore and skills with the availability of factory-made and foreign goods, and the advent of tractors and the motor car. Particularly valuable for the design historian are Sturt's characterizations of the craft as an unscientific folk industry based upon practice, experience and ancient, local customs: 'The conditions in which a waggon grew into a thing of beauty' were, he thought, 'comparable to a fiddle or a boat. Necessity gave the law at every detail, and in scores of ways insisted on conformity. The waggon-builder was obliged to be always faithful, to know always what was imposed on him, in wheels, shafts, axles, carriages, everything. The nature of this knowledge should be noted. It was set out in no book. It was not scientific. I never met a man who professed any other than an empirical acquaintance with the waggon-builder's lore.'[5] Sturt and his craftsmen knew from past examples and knowledge that their waggons had to be designed in very specific ways if they were to function properly but frequently they did not understand why that was the case.

In addition to first-hand accounts such as Sturt's, there are studies of craftwork in 'primitive' societies by anthropologists and scholarly accounts of aspects of folk or peasant crafts. The latter generally appear in obscure journals of local history and material culture.[6] The feminist movement of recent years has

led to an upsurge of writings about the work of craftswomen through the ages. (Sexism has not been so evident in the crafts as in the fine arts.)

Information on contemporary crafts is supplied by the craft magazines and by the catalogues to exhibitions held at such venues as the Crafts Council and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Notes and References

1. 'David Drew, basket-maker', *Sunday Times Magazine* 28 Sept 1986.
2. N. Guitard, 'The greatest clockmaker in the world', *Observer Magazine* 18 April 1982.
3. P. Dormer, 'Post-war craft', *Marxism Today* July 1982, pp. 36-7.
4. E. Lucie-Smith, *The Story of Craft: the Craftsman's Role in Society* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1981); *A History of Industrial Design* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1983).
5. G. Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop* (Cambridge University Press, 1923) p. 73.
6. See, for example, *The Winterthur Portfolio*. This quarterly is subtitled 'a journal of American material culture'. It has featured articles on the design of dams, furniture, wrought iron, stoves, cemeteries, houses, prints, folk art, musical instruments, interior design and textiles.