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Deflating David Pye – 50 Years Later

Posted on December 2, 2018 by Lost Art Press



The plate room at our printing plant in Tennessee. I wouldn't advise telling them that what they do is the "workmanship of certainty."

Anytime someone decides to "think" and then "expound" about the craft of woodworking, you can be sure that a copy of David Pye's "The Nature and Art of Workmanship" (Herbert Press) is close at hand.

Since its publication in 1968, Pye's famous idea of separating the "workmanship of risk" from "the workmanship of certainty" has become both a touchstone and (oddly) a sales slogan for people who write and promote handwork.

I first read Pye's book in 1997, and at the time I dismissed some of his ideas as naive and others as just wrong. (Some of his book, however, is quite thoughtful.) I've picked up the book a few more times since 1997, but each time I couldn't cotton to it.

We're now sitting here on the 50th anniversary of the publication of "The Nature and Art of Workmanship," and I think I'm finally ready to pull my pants down to explain why I don't buy into the "workmanship of risk."

I can already feel the fountain pens trembling in the puffy-shirted arms in response. So be it.



So here's my thing: The phrase and the idea of the "workmanship of certainty" is a contradiction in terms and simply does not exist. In my experience of making things by hand and in an industrial setting, everything is "the workmanship of risk." Nothing is certain.

Let's use David Pye's examples to illustrate the problem.

The most typical and familiar example of the workmanship of risk is writing with a pen, and of the workmanship of certainty, modern printing.

Pye then explains how there is indeed risk involved in the creation of the lead type.

But all this judgment, dexterity and care has been concentrated and stored up before the actual printing starts. Once it does start, the stored up capital is drawn on and the newspapers come pouring out in an absolutely predetermined form with no possibility of variation between them...

Pye clearly knows a lot about woodworking – his CV, bowls and sculptures are spectacular. But I doubt he spent much time in a printing plant. Running a printing press – even a modern computerized one – requires immense skill. It's like driving a 10-ton truck

down a garden lane that is populated by baby bunny rabbits. One tiny misstep and you have thousands of dollars of dollars of wasted paper. And a few squashed bunnies.

I've worked probably a dozen presses, offset and letterpress, since 1986. Nothing is certain about modern printing. Everything relies upon the skill and dexterity of the press operators.

This same sort of skill is necessary on every form of industrialized manufacturing I've been involved in. Making entryway doors on a factory line. Making folding tables in a factory. Bottling liquor. Making magazines, books, holdfasts, dividers, curves and lump hammers.

All of these automated – sometimes computer-controlled processes – require great human skill to achieve. And not just the kind of explicit knowledge you can find on the internet. Industrialized manufacturing is fundamentally ruled by tacit knowledge – the same difficult stuff that we all seek to gain at our workbenches when building furniture.

I basically don't believe that the "workmanship of certainty" exists. It's all risk. And therefore, a meaningless distinction.

I have other problems with Pye's assertions, especially when it comes to sourcing materials. But I think I've lost enough followers for one weekend.

— *Christopher Schwarz*

48 thoughts on “Deflating David Pye – 50 Years Later”



stephenklepper says:

December 2, 2018 at 5:05 pm

I've spent 22 years as a printer, buyer, and currently, a developer of consumer packaging.

You're absolutely correct.

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