THE AESTHETIC CONCEPT OF CRAFTSMANSHIP*

Harold Osborne

I

IT IS the very familiar things in life which are often the most difficult to define. We seem to know all about them until we begin to think about them, and then our assurance vanishes and we are confused. So it is with the concept of craftsmanship. We know what we mean by it, or seem to do so. We can call to mind examples of it and we can recognize it when we see it, or so we think. We speak of good or bad craftsmanship as if we had built-in standards and criteria ready to hand. And the closer we look at it the more complicated it all becomes. Indeed it has been well said that 'craftsmanship' is a word to start an argument with.

This can be illustrated by three conflicting ideas about the nature of craftsmanship that are current today, all to do with the relations of craftsmanship to technology. First, in a good deal of writing about the early stages of human progress, before the dawn of history and in the centuries which constitute what is sometimes called 'proto-history', advances in craftsmanship are spoken of in the same breath as technological advances, no distinction being made between technology and craftsmanship. Secondly, we have all heard those who indignantly proclaim that for the technological culture of today craftsmanship is simply an anachronism, the perpetuation of primitive technology as a time-wasting hobby into an age which has advanced beyond it. In opposition to these, again, there are people who with almost mystic fervour ascribe a spiritual value to craftsmanship as an antidote to the soulless standardization imposed upon modern man by the technology of mass production.

As an instance of the refusal to differentiate craftsmanship from technology I will quote a statement from the Introduction to John Harvey's book *Medieval Craftsmen* written in 1975. He says:

> Craftsmanship is the basis of society. From shaping the most primitive tool to the assembly of the latest computer, human activity has depended upon skill: the coordination of the brain and hands. This process takes many forms, but these do not differ in

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kind. Each output of skill represents exactly the same faculty, an ability to learn an existing method of doing something. Although it is nowadays fashionable to talk of technology, this is nothing more than the discussion of crafts. Essentially such difference as there is remains only one of degree.

Language is flexible and it is, of course, possible to speak of craftsmanship as the manifestation of skill in any sphere, making it synonymous with technology.* Indeed it is not uncommon nowadays to hear talk of a new kind of craftsmanship, meaning skill resulting from practical experience in the efficient manipulation of a machine. But in practice a distinction *is* drawn between craftsmanship and technology and by and large it is a useful, even a necessary, distinction. In the most general terms it is the distinction between making a thing individually by hand and mass-producing many identical things by machine.

The Amerindians who lived in what are now the territories of the Central Andes and the coastal valleys of Peru before the Spanish Conquest are recognized to have been perhaps the most accomplished craftsmen the world has known—in stone masonry, metal working, ceramics, textiles and many other crafts. Yet they were technologically backward. They did not know the use of the saw or the wheel—not even the potter's wheel. They fired their ceramics by the open-hearth method without kiln and they smelted their metals—if indeed they smelted at all—in small pottery furnaces which made use of the prevailing winds for draught. Their weaving was done with primitive backstrap looms. Their stone cutting, which is one of the stock marvels of skill and ingenuity, was done by pecking with stone mauls followed by the use of abrasives. The ancient Chinese were also among the world's great craftsmen, but they too remained technologically undeveloped. Although they anticipated the West in a surprisingly large number of technological discoveries—I am thinking of such things as steam power, paper, printing, gun-powder, the compass—they did not exploit these discoveries for the purposes of mass production but cultivated the various crafts without attempting a sophisticated technology. In situations such as these it becomes apparent that the distinction between craftsmanship and technology corresponds to a real difference in the realm of fact and one which it is important to be able to signalize.

In practice, then, we must differentiate craftsmanship from technology. A complicated cluster of factors enters into this always loosely formulated distinction, the most important of them being the degree of sophistication achieved in tools and machines, the nature of the reliance on these tools and

* The Greeks included the whole of theoretical knowledge, even the theoretical sciences, within the term *techne*. Similarly the word 'art' today has a narrower sense in which it refers to those 'art objects' which we find in museums and galleries and a wider sense in which we speak of 'the art of fencing', 'the art of agriculture', etc. The dictionary definition of 'technology' as 'the practical arts collectively' is not helpful but seems to perpetuate the confusion between art and technology.

machines which is involved, and a different attitude of mind towards the product. The distinction does *not* depend upon the use of machines rather than tools both because it is not possible to draw any clear-cut distinction between what is a machine and what is a tool and because both machines and tools are used in craftsmanship and technology alike.

What, then, is a tool and what is a machine? Man is not the only animal which uses tools, but he is the only animal whose whole way of life is shaped by the use of tools. By and large other animals adapt themselves physiologically to their environmental conditions whereas man adapts his environment to his own needs. Animals which live in conditions of cold evolve thick fur or layers of blubber. Man makes for himself garments from the fur of animals, builds shelters, lights fires, invents central heating and—eventually—air conditioning. In general terms both tools and machines are devices for facilitating man's constant business of adapting his environment to his needs and improving the conditions of his life. We speak of 'tools' when we mean devices for extending the powers of the organism for manipulating its environment. A part of craftsmanship consists in a man's understanding the tools of his trade, possessing the skill and dexterity to use them to the best advantage, and also in the invention of new and more effective tools and the corresponding skills. A good craftsman, it is said, does not blame his tools. It is a sign of good craftsmanship to know the right tools for the job and to have the skill to use them. This distinguishes the true craftsmen from the amateur. We tend to speak of 'machines', on the other hand, when tools become not necessarily more complex but more automatic, particularly when their operation depends upon external motive force. The cowrie shell or wooden batten with which a potter shapes, polishes and decorates his clay body is a primitive tool. The potter's wheel, which is turned by an assistant with a pole or by the potter's kick, leaving both his hands free, is a standard example of an elementary machine. But there is no sharp line of demarcation between them. It might be said that when a man uses tools he is in direct control of the fashioning of his product from beginning to completion, but when he uses machines his control is restricted to the programming and efficient running of the machine. But here too there is no precise distinction. Power-tools, from the potter's wheel to the electric drill, are intermediary. The most one can say is that the marks by which we tend to differentiate machines are automatic operation and diminution of control.

The more sophisticated a tool or a machine becomes the more it gains in accuracy and precision at the expense of versatility. Even fairly simple tools such as drills and lathes and planes have increased accuracy over more elementary devices at the expense of some loss of versatility. The leather worker of ancient Egypt and Rome, for example, had sets of knives each shaped and adapted for a specialised operation. The most versatile and least specialized of all tools is the human hand. And as versatility decreases the demand for

human skill diminishes, or at least changes direction. A machine is planned and constructed to perform a limited number of specialized operations. It must then be programmed for some specific operation or sequence of operations within its competence. And once programmed, the more sophisticated the machine the more automatic its operations become. In modern machine production judgement, experience, ingenuity, dexterity, artistry, skill are all concentrated in the programming before actual production starts. In craftsmanship they are necessary from beginning to end throughout the production process. The difference is as that between typography, where craftsmanship and artistry are restricted to designing a type face, and calligraphy, where they are operative throughout. The sophisticated technology of the modern world has divided the functions of the craftsman between the engineer, who plans the machine, and the industrial designer, who plans the programming of the machine. The old unity of craftsmanship has been broken up in our time.

The same concept of craftsmanship is implicit in the ideas of those who condemn it as an anachronism in our modern age and those who regard it as a spiritual and aesthetic boon. Both regard craftsmanship and machine production as alternative ways of doing the same things. It is their system of values that differs. And so much confusion of values prevails in this area that it behoves us to tread warily.

As machines have become more sophisticated they have not only achieved a degree of precision and accuracy which in previous generations were no more than an unrealisable ideal, they have also become stereotyped to an extent beyond all previous imagination. Once a modern machine has been built and programmed it can do the same thing over and over again with a minimum of variation. Machine products are standardised and so become impersonal. The small irregularities and imperfections which are the marks of what we call handwork, causing each product to differ slightly from every other, are eliminated. It is this standardisation and impersonality which seem to be the inevitable concomitants of mass production. And it is this which makes us restive. We live in an age when factory production has penetrated every nook and cranny of our daily lives—clothes, food, furniture, utensils, everything is mass produced. And there seems to be no way out. The cost of designing and setting up a complicated machine—perhaps a complete plant, perhaps involving prior designing and making of specialised machine tools—the cost in time, labour, energy, skill, experience, in making, testing, modifying the prototype—all this makes it inevitable that once built the machine will be used to capacity for turning out as great a volume of standardised products as the market will absorb. It must pay for itself and then it must work for the profit of its owners and designers; and this is equally true under a system of private ownership or under a system of state-controlled and state-owned industry where initiative is suspect. In either case

our lives are invaded by standardized uniformity that seems to reflect the regimentation of a bureaucracy which—in either kind of political set-up—converts the individual into a cypher. It is this which we obscurely resent. We revolt from the impersonal sameness of the factory product. And the reaction leads to a romantic exaltation of handwork for its own sake. But it is just here that false values begin to creep in and caution is necessary.

In the past men valued accuracy, precision, regularity of workmanship because these were signs of care and skill, dexterity and experience. These were the qualities which could not be faked, the marks of the best craftsmanship, reserved for prestige products made for princes, the Church or the dead. In reaction from the mechanical regularity of the machine we nowadays tend in contrast to put higher value on the irregularities and imperfections which proclaim that a thing is hand made. But this is a false value, opposed to the age-long ideal of craftsmanship. In a technological age it is no doubt good for us, a source of spiritual refreshment, to use our own hands from time to time to make something for ourselves. But we must beware of supposing that the product of handwork has a merit or an added beauty *simply* because it was made by hand. There is no merit, no increment of aesthetic quality, merely in the fact that a thing was made by hand, nor even in the fact that it bears the evident signs of having been made by hand. The sole benefit is to the worker not to the consumer. Being hand-made does not guarantee the excellence of the product. The old craftsman possessed a hard-won skill derived from lifelong immersion in a centuries-old tradition involving inarticulate knowledge of materials and tools, inherited skills and dexterities, principles of design and a pride in excellence. The modern glorification of handwork for its own sake, however inexpert or crude it may be, has little to recommend it. It is not the precision or accuracy of the machine that we should resent. There is an aesthetic satisfaction in a precision job done to a high degree of tolerance. It is the uniformity, the standardization that is bad. And in particular the regularity and sameness of machine production is aesthetically revolting when it is associated with bad workmanship, cheap and inferior materials.

I have mentioned how in a technological culture what used to be the performance of the craftsman is split between the engineer and the industrial designer. We must now consider a further separation, that between design and what may loosely be called workmanship. In craftsmanship design, planning and making are united. Whatever he may use in the way of tools of machines, the craftsman keeps the whole job in his own hands and is responsible for the finished product through all stages of production. In a factory economy we have the engineer who designs the machine, the industrial designer who designs the product and draws up a blue-print for programming the machine, and finally there is the man on the job, whose function is to operate the machine and see that the product comes as nearly as may be

into accordance with the design. For the design is an ideal to which the product approximates according to the suitability of the machine and the quality of the workmanship. But shoddy workmanship may also be inherent in the blue-print design. It may be built into the design for a number of reasons, the chief of which are economic. For economic reasons a designer may specify inferior materials, cheap and ramshackle processes, etc. Part of the job he is paid to do may be precisely to design a product which looks more expensive than it is in order to con the public into buying inferior goods at too high prices. This sort of thing is peculiarly liable to happen in a socialist state, where the consumer public must be continuously sweetened and gulled. In a capitalist system the deliberate debasement of workmanship is most commonly practised in relation to durability. A very wide range of consumer goods of all sorts are purposely designed and manufactured to be less durable than they could be made, less durable than they could be made at the same cost, and this is done in order to keep a market open, in order that people must purchase again in order to replace goods which have perished before their time. In this way the production line is kept rolling, the wheels of industry turning. I am concerned here with the aesthetic aspect of all this. For there is an aesthetic aspect to workmanship. We approve of things well made and we are aesthetically distressed at the shoddy and ramshackle. Distress is never so keen as when the precision and polish of machine manufacture are used to cloak shoddy workmanship and to give a spurious appearance of excellence to what is of deliberately inferior quality. This too is one of the sicknesses of our age.

This brings us to a difference of mental stance which I think is fundamental to the change from an age of craftsmanship to an age whose economy derives anarchically from machine production. In the Preface to *The Oxford Companion to the Decorative Arts* I wrote that craftsmanship

> involves a genuine pride in the process of production itself, a pride which drives a man to make whatever things he makes as well as they can be made, even beyond economic considerations of reward. This impulse, which lies at the roots of fine craftsmanship, is now recognised by anthropologists to have existed from the earliest stages of human activity . . . . It is this impulse, this cult of excellence, which through the centuries of prehistory and history led to the perpetuation of traditions of craftsmanship, the rich storehouses of know-how and skill.

The motivations of an economically controlled industrialized society leave no room for this cult of perfection and this is why, apart from a few isolated pockets, it is disappearing from contemporary life. Yet is is one of the most ancient and deeply rooted of human drives. It has been largely responsible for human progress from primitive barbarism to civilized comfort. And it is still probably a necessity to a fully integrated and satisfactorily self-realized personality, so that its excision causes a sense of unexplained loss and a bewildered feeling of spiritual emptiness. It is one of those essentially human

drives which finds its place in the borderland between a psychological urge and an obligation, between an aesthetic and a moral ideal. One might perhaps best speak of it as an ethical life-style aesthetically based.

Closely allied to this is the sense of *quality* and the respect for quality. It is an attitude of mind which is integral to craftsmanship and just as foreign to factory industry where economic considerations permit no valuation of quality for itself. In the world of today quality must be sold and like any other commodity it has its market price. It is not respected for its own sake and the feeling for quality is disappearing among producers and consumers alike. Yet it is a precious thing, as every craftsman knows, and much of the unanalysed discontent today maybe traced to the encroachment of shoddy goods cloaked by a superficial glitter of spurious machine precision until they have dominated our living environment.

There is quality in design as well as in materials and workmanship, but not everyone has the gift to originate design of high quality—indeed this talent, if not as rare as the genius which produces great art, belongs to that order of rarity. But everyone engaged in craftsmanship needs the gift to recognize quality of design. Otherwise you have vulgarity and meretriciousness. The old craftsmen had access to long traditions of design within which they could initiate modifications and innovations. But unless a craftsman could absorb the tradition and make it his own, unless he had an inborn capacity for good design, he was a mere journeyman copier. The modern craftsman for the most part lacks this foundation: too many traditions are open to him for any one to be absorbed as his own and however secretly frustrated they are, his public are habituated to the designs of machine-made goods. And quality of design is what deteriorates most rapidly and most seriously in a machine economy. In theory the most subtle design can be specified and communicated in a blue-print for programming a machine designed for its production in mass. But in practice the specification of subtlety and refinement of design and their implementation are usually so complicated that they are not an economic possibility. Design in factory industry tends always to the crude, unsubtle, vulgar, ready-made. And the general public, the masses of people on the receiving end, with each new generation are losing the sense and feeling for discriminating quality of design—this lies at the heart of what some of the Pop artists were trying to communicate. Yet this too creates a widespread feeling of unexplained deprivation and loss.

If the craftsmen who are still active in the world can do something to maintain the cult of excellence, the pride in a good job well done, and the respect for quality, then indeed their contribution to contemporary society is more than justified. They are no anachronism but one of the few forces that are left to stem the deterioration and dehumanization of contemporary life.

II

In order to reach a rounded understanding of what we mean by 'craftsmanship' it is necessary to differentiate craftsmanship not only from technology but also from fine art. The distinction between craftsmanship and fine art is also largely a pragmatic one which seems straightforward at first sight but becomes the more complicated the more closely one looks into it. It corresponds in part to the distinction which museums make between 'fine' and 'decorative' art on the analogy of the French 'beaux-arts' and 'arts décoratifs'.

Traditionally the great majority of fine art has also involved fine craftsmanship. But craftsmanship is not essential to fine art. There can be good art without fine craftsmanship (though more often today art which seems to flout craftsmanship does in fact hide excellent craftsmanship under the guise of careless facture) and some schools of contemporary art—for example, those inaugurated by Allan Kaprow—have expressly repudiated the ideals of craftsmanship from their concept of art. On the other hand craftsmanship is, of course, not restricted to the field of art but is far more extensive even than what is customarily recognized as 'decorative art'. At the same time there is a fairly intimate link between craftsmanship and aesthetic quality, at least in many of its manifestations. Whatever other purposes they may serve and whatever other associations they may evoke, works of decorative art are also appreciated in the same sort of way, command the same sort of experience, as works of fine art. And over the whole field of craftsmanship there is aesthetic delight in the apprehension of skilled and devoted workmanship applied economically to the successful achievement of a practical purpose, while virtuosity deployed for its own sake arouses the same sort of distaste as any other form of self-display.

If it is not easy to reduce these considerations to logical coherence and clarity in terms of closely defined concepts, this is not to be wondered at in view of the fact that historically, until the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, no general distinction was consciously made between the fine arts and the practical crafts. When the concepts of fine art gradually emerged practical considerations weighed as importantly as theoretical ones in determining the shape it took and it was not until the present century that the idea of fine art as 'autonomous' came to the forefront of aesthetic thinking. To this day the distinction has not been clarified with general acceptation. Four main bases for discrimination have been suggested: (1) art is expressive of feeling and emotion while craft is not; (2) craft is 'end-directed' but art is not; (3) crafts, typically, envisages utility and function, whereas fine art is 'gratuitous', divorced from utility and function; and (4) while the products of craftsmanship function within the confines of everyday social life, the fine arts carry new insights or suggest new ways of

apprehending life and affairs. While each of these suggestions brings some insight into the distinctions that are made, none has proved wholly satisfactory or attracted general agreement.*

(1) The idea that works of art are vehicles for the communication of feeling and emotion or carry a spiritual message of high import whereas the products of the crafts, primarily and typically, serve utilitarian purposes has an initial plausibility and has been supported by many writers. But it will not hold water as the basis for a final distinction between art and craft. In reaction from Abstract Expressionism in America and Tachism in Europe there have been schools of art which deliberately aimed at impersonality, eschewing personal feeling and emotion. Much painting and sculpture during the 1960s and 1970s has intended the work of art to be seen exactly for what it is and any suggestion of 'message' or emotion has been deplored. This is not an entirely new thing but has been a recurrent feature of art, emphasized but not originated by Constructivism. (See my article 'Non-Iconic Abstraction,' *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 16, No. 4.) Even in figurative art there have been schools which aimed at objective representation rather than personal interpretation. Expressiveness is not on any count a universal feature according to which all works of fine art can be appraised, but is one possibility among many. On the other hand expressiveness cannot be wholly eliminated from the products of craftsmanship. The love of materials, devotion and care in their shaping for a purpose, joy and pride in the application of skill and know-how, delight in fine appearance, functional and elegant design, appropriate decoration—all these are reflected in craft objects and are communicated in their appreciation. Moreover through the crafts of a people or a culture we come to know not only their technology and way of life but something of their spiritual outlook and their attitudes to the world and to human destiny. This generic affinity between art and craft is perhaps more basic than the distinctions which arose later in Western culture.

(2) It is sometimes said that the crafts are end-directed in a way in which fine art is not. The purpose of the craft object is 'external'. The craftsman knows what he intends to make, has an exemplar of it before his mind, knows what its use is to be, how it should function. Contrary to this the purpose of an art work, it is claimed, cannot be separated from it but is implicit in the work itself and the process of its production. Hence the purpose of each art work is unique to it, the success with which that purpose is achieved can be judged only by 'internal' standards, and this is what is meant by calling art 'creative'. Again, it is not easy to express this distinction in absolute terms. Artists often do work to external ends. An artist may set himself to

* The grounds of differentiation suggested by Collingwood in *Principles of Art* (1938) envisage his own peculiar theory that a work of fine art is a mental created object whose material embodiment is irrelevant to its existence.

make a picture of a certain piece of scenery, to paint a Crucifixion or incidents from the life of a saint; his purpose may be to write an oration for a specific effect (Demosthenes, Cicero, Burke), to write a sonnet on the theme of love and mortality, to compose a dirge, and so on. Sometimes artists work to a commission which determines the nature of their performance within certain general lines. It is argued that such 'external' aims and purposes as can be expressed in a commission or otherwise formulated are irrelevant to the appraisal of a work of art. The *artistic* end, which alone determines its quality as art, is inherent in the work and cannot be verbalized. The artist can reveal it ostensively by pointing to the work but cannot describe it in isolation from the work. To some extent this is true and to some extent it represents a real difference between fine art and craft. But it would be rash to allege that failure to achieve an 'external' purpose successfully is always wholly irrelevant to the quality of a work of art in appreciation. And when products of craftsmanship are appreciated as 'decorative art' there is always much more involved than awareness of successful functioning.

(3) The criterion of utility is also both plausible and ultimately unsatisfactory. It may be pointed out that some works of craftsmanship are non-useful in conception—jewellery, etc. are intended for appearance and decoration rather than use; much fine craftsmanship in ceramics, sculpture, textile and other crafts has been intended to honour the dead or placate the gods in the same manner as religious ritual, music, hymns, etc. Much fine art is of course useful in intention, including most architecture. Being useful does not debar an artifact from being classed as a work of fine art and being without practical utility does not exclude it from categorization as decorative art. Yet as a broad distinction utility makes some sense. Indeed in much modern Minimal art, kinetic art, pseudo-machine art, etc. non-utility is the main feature which distinguishes purporting art objects from industrial products made for use.

When the concept of fine art emerged in the eighteenth century non-utility (in the common senses of 'utility') and the expression of feeling or 'sentiment' were prominent features of it. It is therefore not unnatural that they retain importance in the pragmatic distinctions that are still made. But it is important that the distinctions be not exaggerated in such a way as to lose sight of the basic affinities between art and craftsmanship. It is especially deplorable if those sectors of craftsmanship whose products find their way into museums as 'decorative art' are dismissed as no more than an inferior or second-grade category of fine art. They have their own aesthetic status and their own wealth of aesthetic appeal deriving not least from their deeply rooted integration in human and social activity.

(4) Finally, the claim that fine art is 'revelatory' whereas craftsmanship belongs within the sphere of practical life in society has been ably and plausibly argued. Fine art, it is claimed, reveals essentially new insights into

fundamental truths of human nature and the world or suggests new apprehensions, new ways of perceiving and understanding, human nature, human destiny and life in the world itself. In this sense it is 'metaphysical' but its insights and apprehensions, its new attitudes and perceptions, cannot be transcribed into words or communicated in scientific prose. If this is accepted, each work of art is by definition creative and unique. Its uniqueness must be seen and cannot be described.

Two considerations render it doubtful whether this claim, however, plausible, can be ultimately acceptable as a necessary condition for any artifact to be a work of art; and if it is not a necessary condition, it is not ultimately satisfactory as the basis for distinguishing art from craft. The considerations are the following: (1) Although many works of fine art, and in particular those which have been recognized as masterpieces, do seem to have this revelatory character and to communicate this kind of insight, to claim that *all* fine art must be revelatory in this sense would involve a very radical and extensive revision of the class of artifacts which traditionally and currently are recognized to be fine art. There are many works commonly and unquestionably accepted as fine art but for which it could not be plausibly asserted that they are revelatory in this way. (2) In the case of those works of art which do seem to impart new ways of perceiving the world, new truths about life or destiny in the world, we do not consider that their use and value has ended when their 'message' has been imparted. We do not value a Manet or a Cézanne the less when we have grasped the new ways of perceiving which they embody; our 'use' for a Beethoven quartet is not over when we have heard it with a sense of the revelation which it carries. But this would be a very strange thing if the essential feature in virtue of which we value such artifacts as art were their power to impart new insights, new revelations. Rather, our behaviour seems to indicate that the value of great art consists in what it is for appreciation and continuous apprehension rather than in any revelatory insight which it carries into things other than itself. Both fine art and craftsmanship are valued and appraised for what they themselves are, whatever incidental uses and values they have.