

## WHAT IS CRAFTS FOR?

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While I was thinking about this article, I came across a book called *Out on the Porch*. I realized that if architecture with all its pretense at greatness, could be compared to the fine arts, then the porch with its domestic grounding was certainly the crafts. While architecture is responsible for the buildings where momentous occasions in our public life occur, the porch is a private space where the personal aspects of our life are played out. Reynolds Price in his introduction describes that kind of experience.

“The average literate American – especially one who’s well-read in American fiction – is likely, at the mention of porches, to think first and last of a rangy white house...banked with old trees and dark green shrubs, and fronted or ringed by a broad shady porch with rocking chairs and a hanging swing that will seat at least two peaceful adults or (better yet) one drowsy adult and a much-loved child, stroked by the merest trace of a breeze and engaged in a soft-voiced dialogue of no great moment as to subject or theme, though deeply rewarding to heart and mind through a whole life’s memory”.<sup>1</sup>

In my mind I have always thought of crafts role in culture in exactly the same way as the porch’s. Rather than attempting broad, sweeping statements on the state of society or creating heroic interpretations of man’s position in the universe, like the fine arts; the crafts have historically provided a background for, or in some cases facilitated the kind of heightened moments of pleasure and awareness that Price describes. For me this is a noble goal with enormous possibilities for personal expression. Western culture, as it is represented by the fine arts, however, has not placed much value – cultural or monetary – on the traditional role of crafts. The result has been an effort over the past 25 or 30 years by the American crafts movement to redefine the term “crafts” in order to gain acceptance by the fine arts. It seems, on the face of it, ridiculous that any field with a visual language and history as rich as crafts’, would trade it for a view of art as narrow and ephemeral as modernism’s. A view, which Ellen Dissanayake in her book *What Is Art For*, puts into historical perspective for us.

“...it is assumed by the art world that a work of art has its own autonomous value, apart from being useful (a goblet), or skillfully made (an engraved snuffbox), or impressively carved (a monument). An art object need serve no purpose other than its own existence as something for aesthetic contemplation. In this view, art is “for” nothing except itself. It need have no other justification – such as accurately depicting reality, or putting the spectator in touch with eternal verities, or revealing phenomenological or emotional truth. The primary value of a work of art need no longer be that it edifies or instructs, that it is rare or uses costly materials, that it is well made.

Yet neither in classical or medieval times, nor indeed in any other civilization or traditional society that we know of, have works been made to serve as “art objects”, to be judged by aesthetic criteria alone, or appraised primarily for their power to evoke aesthetic enjoyment.”<sup>2</sup>

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1   2   3

If there is an underlying principle, a thread that runs through all crafts throughout history, it is use. The modern crafts establishment, however, argues that since we no longer need crafts to support our everyday existence, the only option available to the crafts is to become objects of aesthetic admiration. If crafts, as we have historically understood them, have been made “unnecessary” by the industrial revolution and the goal of crafts is now purely aesthetic (to only be looked at), then perhaps the logical thing to do would be to strike the word “crafts” from our vocabulary altogether. That, of course, would mean abandoning our special museums, magazines, arts funding and university departments devoted to crafts. I wonder how many people in the modern crafts movement take their beliefs that seriously?

There is no question that the role of crafts has changed, human beings, though, have changed very little. That is why even if all the ceramic sculptors and vessel maker’s work commanded five figure sums, and was exhibited exclusively at the Museum of Modern Art, people would continue to want useful handmade objects. In spite of a glut of Tupperware and regardless of the contemporary crafts movement’s insistence that useful objects cannot be considered as ART, people would still have the desire to seek solace and comfort at certain moments during their day and to celebrate special occasions in their lives with useful objects created by the hand of another human being. One cannot explain this phenomenon within the narrow parameters of modernist art criticism, it is much more consequential and far-reaching than that. Crafts are inexorably linked to our very development as a species and each of us, whether we appreciate the idea of “Art” or not, will probably always be drawn to a handmade cup, bowl or plate. In much the same way our technological advances have not curbed our desire to ride horses, sail boats, hike and sleep outdoors, hunt, play sports, grow vegetables and eat meat cooked over an open fire. These activities, like crafts, not only give us joy, but also console us and remind us of what it means to be human.

The rejection of use by modern crafts does more than cut crafts off from its history; it denies crafts access to the senses. The senses, after all, are the way we understand and participate in the world in which we live. The question then arises, though, as to what kind of meaning can touch and surface carry. When, for example, we wrap our hands around a mug and feel its surface, or put our fingers through the handle and admire the balance achieved by the maker as we bring it to our lips, is there the possibility for some kind of moral or aesthetic truth to be transmitted within this experience? John Dewey in his book *Art As Experience*, suggests that, “There is no limit to the capacity of immediate sensuous experience to absorb into itself meanings and values that in and of themselves – that is in the abstract – would be designated ‘ideal’ and ‘spiritual’”.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of exploring how and why we respond to certain aspects of useful crafts and thereby expanding crafts language, modern crafts has chosen to either mimic useful objects (resulting in the self-conscious caricatures of teapots, pitcher and cups that abound at crafts fairs across the country), or create sculptural work (found predominantly in university galleries) whose main message seems to be about clever and unusual uses of “crafts” materials and techniques.

WHAT IS CRAFTS FOR?

1 2 3

While the modern crafts movement may believe that the only way crafts can be viable in modern contemporary culture is to abandon its historical associations with use and the home, other solutions and value systems do exist and can furnish crafts with a way to participate while not only maintaining the integrity of their arts, but also exploiting its richness to address some of the alienation individuals experience at the hands of modern culture. John Dewey offers that, "A conception of fine arts that sets out from its connection with discovered qualities of ordinary experience will be able to indicate the factors and forces that favor the normal development of human activities into matters of artistic value". He further suggests that, "The enemies of the aesthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure".<sup>4</sup>

Those of us, who have been moved by crafts eloquence in the past and find those kind of feelings absent from the contemporary milieu, and who are struggling to form our own expression inside crafts' historical language have to adopt a more rigorous and aggressive philosophical position about crafts' role in modern society if we wish crafts to be an essential structure within our cultural life.

References:

1. Reynolds Price, *Out On The Porch* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill 1992).
2. Ellen Dissanayake, *What Is Art For*, (University of Washington Press, 1988), p. 41.
3. John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (Perigree Books, 1980). p. 29.
4. Ibid. 11, 40.