Can Craft Be Saved?

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Craft beer, craft clothing, craft candles, craft cakes -- edible craft, drinkable craft, and wearable craft. Martha Stewart, our populist guide to all things art, food, and fashion, now has a crafts department. Even Apple Computer, in a recent and starkly minimalistic ad, talks about "...crafting around our intention." If everything is craft, is anything craft?

Commercial products present complex clusters of both tangible and intangible attributes, so the term craft, in theory, signals a promise beyond price. Buyers with imperfect information in markets will pay attention to labels and sellers are constantly seeking ways to differentiate their offerings. Pioneering entrants to markets can capitalize on branding which can create a barrier to entry for later competitors. At least, that is what economic theory tells us.

However, when thousands of people and firms compete using the same differentiator, its power to sway consumers diminishes. What begins as a strategy of product differentiation ends up as a meaningless moniker in saturated markets where 'me to' branding seldom works (especially with price sensitive customers).

In such cases, one strategy is to modify the term – 'hand crafted' or 'crafted in the USA' -- or chose another term, but choice matters. For instance, the term 'artisan' has been so overused that even *USA Today* recently objected to rampant 'artisan-washing' and the *New York Times* noted that, "This word has been co-opted by all the wrong people selling all the wrong products."[1] We now have artisan lettuce and onions, cheese, and even pencil sharpening ($15 a pencil!).[2] The final straw has been the cooptation of the term by the fast food industry (Burger King advertised an "artisan" bun for its hamburger).

Where is this heading? What if the word 'craft' becomes like a joke where everybody knows the punch line? Its ability to pleasantly surprise, mystify, or motivate disappears. It is easy to forget that the craft began not as a means to differentiate products in mass markets but as a social movement reacting to the emergence of industrial-driven, mass markets and the perceived dangers of run-away consumerism.

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The word craft derives from the old English *craeft*, meaning skill or strength. Most interpretations stress the idea of making something with skill and careful attention to detail and may stress the idea of doing a job well for its own sake. The output of craft, whether furniture, computer code, or a motorcycle, should be judged by how it was produced, not just its utility, beauty, or sell-ability. This implies a focus on the sphere of creation and design (on the intention or the 'why'), and the maker rather than just the object made. Early conceptions of craft often highlighted a characteristic where something was "…designed and made by the same person."[3]

To appreciate just how far the concept of craft has strayed from its roots, it is worth a short visit to England in the mid 19th century where the crafts movement arose at the intersection of historical handwork and emerging industrial mass production. At one level, it was a reaction to fears of the deskilling and degradation of human labor and the negative aesthetic impact of mass-produced consumer goods. At another level, it provided a cohesive vision of a better society at a time of disruptive change.

Driven by people like John Ruskin and William Morris, the later described as a "poet, artist, manufacturer, and socialist", it brought together a constellation of progressive reformers, Victorian socialites, labor activists, artists and craftsmen interested in a critical examination of the intersection of art, work, and life. Many involved in the early crafts movement in England -- such as the artist and book illustrator Walter Crane and the painter Henry Holiday – were diehard socialists with activist political agendas.

In the early 1900's the crafts movement drifted across the Atlantic. Landing on American shores, its adherents organized new communities in places like Boston and Chicago. Arts and crafts ideas from England merged with American utopian experiments of how society should be shaped, organized, and managed. The experiments took a variety of forms: guilds, such a the Guild of Arts and Crafts of New York; cooperative workplaces, such as Rookwood Pottery in Cincinnati, Grueby Pottery in Boston, the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works in Doylesville, PA, or Rohlf's Furniture in Buffalo, NY; and utopian communities like Rose Valley near Philadelphia and village industries in Deerfield, MA. In some areas the movement became both popularized and mainstreamed. Today's readers of magazines like *Real Simple* would be surprised to find that it was monthlies like *Ladies Home Journal* in the early 1900's, under editor Edward Bok, and *House Beautiful* that promoted a move to simpler lifestyles and more utilitarian furnishings and homes.

However, by the late 1920s, much of the arts and crafts movement had lost its appeal and impact in the US and England. An interesting and longer lasting offshoot occurred in Germany with the founding of the Deutscher Werkbund in 1907 by twelve artists, architects and businessmen. With short interruptions during the late Depression and World War II, the impact of the Werkbund stretched out over a century (it exists today) with connections to the German Bauhaus through people like Walter Gropius. This longevity was in part due to the anti-fascist function the Bauhaus would later provide in post WWII Germany and the cross-cultural power of its design ethos, which was transplanted to the U.S. through the exodus of German artists and designers to places like Black Mountain College in North Carolina and the School of Design in Chicago.[4]

Viewed in retrospect, the arts and craft movement was not a rallying cry for neo-Luddites or for soppy-eyed romantics dreaming for a return to a world that existed before the machine intervened between the hand and the object. Followers were confronting the realities of a 'new industrialism' that involved a transformation of work and the workplace, a situation we confront today.

Some historians have pointed out '...the craftsman ideal has retained an emancipatory potential for the individual, if not the society."[5] As we leave the 20th century, we transition out of what Lewis Mumford called the Neotechnic phase, ranging roughly from the 19th century Industrial Revolution to the present. But what comes next? Given today's discussions about the transformation of the workplace, community-based economic development, and the nature of work in a post-industrial economy, it is not surprising to find a renewed interest in the concept of craft. But is the craft ideal even relevant in our digital age? The original craft movement focused attention on three areas that remain highly relevant today: our relationship to the machine and the roles and responsibilities of consumers and producers.

The machine: At some point in time, quality control of a product passed from the individual artisan to the machine. The exact timing is disputed but is may have happened around 1770 in an English screw factory run by Job and William Wyatt that employed children.[6] By the late 19th century, the inevitability of industrial expansion and failure of early experiments with small-scale communal production forced the movement to confront the machine. In 1901, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright challenged the arts and craft movement, saying, "We are at last face to face with the machine – the modern Sphinx – whose riddle the artists must solve if he could that art live…"[7] By the 1930's, Walter Gropius wrote that "The Bauhaus accepts the machine as the most modern means of design." As the English

woodworker David Pye would later point out, craft does not necessarily imply 'by hand' and, in fact, most craftsmen use tools.[8] Tools change the nature of craft but do not necessarily destroy its premises. If "the biological world is replacing the machine as the general model of design," as Neri Oxman at MIT's Media Lab has noted, then our relationship to the machine is undergoing yet another radical transformation, as the machine becomes alive.

The consumer: Early on, the crafts movement highlighted the responsibilities of not just the craftsperson, but the consumer, by asking potential buyers to reflect on the conditions of production. Early documents of the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts reminded people that, "…every object of combined beauty and use which they buy has a history behind it, and is the result of good and evil conditions."[9] The 1907 manifesto of the German Werkbund implored members to push the concept of craft into the public mind as well as that of the seller and consumer.[10] Over the past decade, we have witnessed the emergence of the so-called craft consumer[11] Craft consumption requires that the "...consumer be directly involved in both the design and the production of what is to be consumed." Today's concepts of ethical consumerism or socially responsible consumption have deeper roots in early craft ideals.

The manufacturer: It was John Ruskin who raised the question of what constitutes a 'just business.' In his essay on modern manufacturing and design, he warned manufacturers of the risk of "corrupting public taste and encouraging public extravagance." Ruskin's concerns were later reflected in a foundational principle articulated by the first director of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, who would emphasize that design and ethics were inexorably bound.[12] This sense that the craftsperson has a social obligation that extends beyond the objects created is a core principle of the Japanese 'shokunin'.[13] Recently, the French designer Philippe Starck criticized today's design as lacking idealism and morality.[14] The roots of this problem may extend back into our educational system. As design educator Katherine McCoy has noted, "We have trained a profession that feels political or social concerns are either extraneous to our work or inappropriate." It is interesting to question whether Apple Computer's idea of "crafting around our intention" extended to the factory floor in China, where questions have arisen about the firm's labor and environmental practices. Steve Jobs embodied a fascinating mixture of the liberal arts, humanities and technology but was often criticized for being apolitical. To paraphrase the urban activist Jane Jacobs, we have created a 'design cult' instead of a 'cult of social reform' where our intentions are open to question and debate.

Like the early members of the crafts movement, we are on the cusp of a new industrialism. Our relationship to the machine and the process of creation and production are in flux and our responsibilities as consumers, or potential producers, lack clear definition. Optimists might argue that our digital economy, with burgeoning virtual marketplaces, an appetite for open source sharing, and tools for decentralized production could underpin a new craft movement. The premises are worth a closer examination.

In theory, the emergence of electronic markets that reduce search costs, allow one-to-one marketing, and support the increased personalization or customization of offerings should benefit the craftsperson. However, the Internet can create powerful intermediaries that can destroy the sense of community and social cohesion that characterize a craft culture, a culture that must support the transfer of skills and ideals, not just goods.

Ebay tells its users: "Is it possible to make money on eBay selling your handcrafted items? The answer is: that depends." Such warnings have not stopped hand crafters from flocking to aggregator sites like Esty. What began as a neat idea in 2005 to sell hand-painted furniture has grown to an online market that is approaching $1 billion in annual sales with one million sellers. As Esty grew, so did the complaints that the company was selling out to venture capitalists and mass producers disguised as small-shop artisans. As one critic lamented, "Esty has turned handmade into just another annoyingly pretentious brand…."[15] Growing dissatisfaction with sites like Esty have created space for smaller upstarts like Artfire. But the dynamics of the Internet economy tend to create winner-take-all markets and firms, not the egalitarian bazaar worshiped by the early cyber-evangelists. Friction-free electronic markets may ultimately benefit crafts, if they lead to the reduced role of powerful, profit-driven intermediaries and can be harnessed to build communities of practice that embody craft ideals. Or the Internet could flood the market with pseudo-craft and trivialize the concept beyond redemption.

Salvation, if it comes, might appear in another form – the maker movement. The musician David Byrne rightly noted that, "The art of making music, clothes, art, or even food has a very different and possibly more beneficial effect on us than simply consuming those things."[16] Decades of downsizing, right sizing, and outsourcing have alienated the professional classes in ways their industrial brethren suffered a century ago. As observers like Barbara Garson have noted: "…extraordinary human ingenuity has been used to eliminate the need for human ingenuity."[17] This has lead to increasing numbers of highly educated, creative people seeking meaning in their

private lives, giving rise to craft collectives, from knitting clubs to maker communities, thriving through on-line and face-to-face interactions.[18] [19]

Small, specialized DIY maker communities are flourishing today, focused on developing medical devices, robotics components, environmental sensors, or biotechnology tools and many have the characteristics of earlier guilds, including codes of conduct, training programs (apprenticeships), and, importantly, a shared consensus about what constitute quality work.[20] They are reminders that the purpose of craft guilds was to teach skills and set standards, not just allocate costs in the market.[21] Early theorists argued that industrialization 'deskilled' craft, and that these skills were not magically redistributed. Virtual and face-to-face maker communities create a re-distribution medium for valuable skills if properly designed and maintained.

These are hopeful developments but the ultimate outcomes remain uncertain. One can examine the aspirations surrounding 3-d printing. Neil Gershenfeld at MIT's Center for Bits and Atoms has commented that we should use the technology, "Not to make what you can buy at Wal-Mart, but to make what you can't buy at Wal-Mart." An analysis of downloads from Thingiverse (www.thingiverse.com), an on-line repository of digital fabrications files, indicates that people are largely making what they can already buy, with some variation. This may increase the variability of consumer offerings but hardly seems to constitute craft. Personal fabrication could take us down the same rabbit hole as personal computing, where, as Jaron Lanier has noted, first-order creation is replaced by a knock-off culture making endless derivatives and where, ultimately, "quantity doesn't translate into quality."[22]

Thousands of Gen Y'ers with 3-d printers might drive a new resurgence of craft, but maybe not. A recent study of the moral reasoning of emerging adults (ages 18-23) found that "For the vast majority, mass consumerism was good, end of story. Some others thought that mass consumerism may have some problems, they admitted, but none that they can understand or that need to affect their own lifestyle and goals."[23]

There is much at stake and that may account for the recent appearance of a number of books that seek to re-examine and re-interpret the concept of craft in today's social context. In *Shop Craft as Soulcraft*, Matthew Crawford, a University of Chicago trained philosopher, leaves a Washington DC think tank, starts a motorcycle repair shop, and explores the value of getting one's hands dirty. Christopher Frayling, the former Rector at the Royal College of Art in England, argues in *On Craftsmanship*, for a *new Bauhaus,* a place "where art, craft, and design can engage with a post-

industrial age." Finally, there is New York University sociologist Richard Sennett's tour de force, *The Craftsman.* Sennett, a one-time student of Hannah Arendt, offers probably the most radical interpretation and makes the point, harking back to the early roots of the crafts movement, that 'good craftsmanship implies socialism.'

Though there are signs of a tilting towards a more liberal worldview in parts of the U.S., nobody is calling it socialism nor is anybody likely to use the term.[24] A new craft movement would first need to 'craft' a compelling and contagious message to focus social change and mobilize a diverse set of actors. One model may be what has happened with food, which has brought together diverse constituents supporting everything from farmland preservation, to school lunch reform, animal rights, urban agriculture, and local economic growth. Michael Pollan recently observed that food is serving as a type of "'edible dynamic' — a means to a political end that is only nominally about food itself." In the end, the Internet won't save crafts, people will.

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[10] The Denkschrift: "Aber es wird auch nötig sein, in dem großen Publikum der Käufer und Abnehmer aufklärend und belehrend zu wirken, um die gute Arbeit immer mehr zur Anerkennung zu bringen."

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[13] "The shokunin has a social obligation to work his/her best for the general welfare of the people. This obligation is both spiritual and material, in that no matter what it is, the shokunin's responsibility is to fulfill the requirement." – Tasio Odate. The recent movie "Jiro Dreams of Sushi" provides some insights in the concept.

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