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THE EMERGENCE OF THE ARTIST-CRAFTSMAN

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By

John Keogh

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## Introduction.

The subject of this thesis has evolved from my own personal experiences of hand-craft making. I have often wondered why I was making by hand individual one-off items, while seeing the producing world around me dominated by an ever increasing complex of technology. I have noticed a growing number of young artists, being involved in an art school myself choosing to devote their efforts to a study of traditional craft skills and wondered might this be a reflection of discontent with modern production technology.

'Man prefers the creative and free to the fixed and standardized'

Soetsu Yanagi founder of the Japanese folk-art movement.

Resulting from my research I hope to trace the emergence and development of what we know as the artist craftsman.

To make, to exercise, skill is basic to our species, from earliest times man has used these gifts to build an environment which would fulfill his needs and aspirations.

'and likewise it is beyond doubt that still today man tends always to invest his objects of common use with some quantity of aesthetic value'

from the introduction by Gillio Dorofles

to the 'Man-Made object' by Gyorgy Kepes.

In the hand-made object the aesthetic characteristics result from the process of production itself and thus can be added by the artist, in the industrially produced object every aesthetic quality is already implicit in the design for the object. In most hand-production there is a limit of perfection, and a margin of chance or risk that which industrial work does not know.

Mass production, aesthetically has resulted in standardization and lack of diversity. Hand-craft making, triumphs because of the uniqueness and subtle variations with which it invests objects. It reflects the personality of the maker and is thus very much man centered.

'A glass jug, a wicker basket, a wooden serving dish, beautiful objects not despite their usefulness but because of it. Their beauty is an inherent part of them like the perfume and the colour of flowers. It is inseparable from their function, they are beautiful, things because they are useful things'.

from an introduction to the

Worlds Crafts Council Exhibition  
Catalogue (1974) by the Mexican writer  
Octavio Paz.

In the following section I hope to trace the ancestry of the artist-craftsman, the details are quite discordant, but from them I wish to show that the craftsman always existed and the qualities which he conferred on his work has always been prized in societies. These details I hope to use as a background to my study of William Morris and his dominant effect on our attitudes towards hand-craft work to-day.

Primitive Society, and the Middle Ages - B.

the Lunis Indians of America.

'primitive peoples generally, conceive of everything made - whether structure or utensil or weapon as living - a still sort of life, but as potent and as capable of functioning not only obdurately and resistingly but also actively and powerfully in occult ways, either for good or evil. As for living things they observe every animal is formed and acts or functions according to its form, the furry four footed animal running and leaping and the scaly finny fish swimming - so the things made or born in their special forms by the hands of man also have life and function according to their various forms'.

A comment from Herbert Read's Art and Society.

Primitive peoples always seem to have a very living organic experience with their environment, and their Art seems a clear reflection of this. In a later section Herbert Read goes on to describe another type of art which may arise in a society.

'Art arising in the course of technical processes involved in the

manufacture of utilitarian objects,

from Herbert Reads Art and Society.

The artist was not special, he did not command a unique position in the society, the artist possessed a necessary skill, which the community used as it needed. A similar position prevailed through the Middle Ages, artist and maker were one. Most art work centered around the building of the great Gothic Cathedrals and the masons are a good example of this type of worker.

'The masons carried in their heads a stock not so much of patterns as of ideas, that grew by experience as they went from one site to the next. The wandering builders were an intellectual aristocracy and could move all over Europe sure of a job and a welcome. The skill that they carried in their heads seemed to others to be as much a mystery as a traditional secret fund of knowledge that stood outside the dreary formalism, of pulpit learning that the universities taught'

from 'The Ascent of Man'

by Jacob Bronowski.

## The Renaissance. C

The Renaissance signified the re-birth of the artistic and cultural values of Classical Antiquity as seen by late Medieval Man. The Renaissance minds were exploring minds, increasing scientific knowledge in such areas as human anatomy and perspective. Above all the Renaissance mind explored humanism i.e. the study of Man, Active Man.

By the 16th Century the leading artists were emphasising the intellectual nature of their work in order to deny its craft connections. In 1563 the first Academy of Art was founded the intention being to elevate the role of painter and sculptor to the same level of patronage as poets and musicians. Giorgio Vasari was the founder, and Michaelangelo and the Grand Duke of Tuscany were the first important patrons.

Resulting from the founding of the Academy, a situation arose whereby the relationship between 'art and craft' became as that between 'manager and employee'.



## The Industrial Revolution. D.

The Industrial Revolution was a specifically English way of solving many social problems. England was by the mid-eighteenth century a leading manufacturing nation, though the manufacture was cottage industry. By the end of the eighteenth century trade grew more competitive, the needs of Industry grew harsher too.

The organisation of work in the cottage was no longer productive enough, between 1760-1820 the traditional way of running industry changed. Before 1760 it was standard to take work to villagers in their own homes, by 1820 it was routine to bring workers into a factory and have them overseen. The subsequent division of labour, resulting from the development of factories hastened the process of splitting each craft into many separate skills.

The immediate result of this development was a sudden increase in production demanding more and more workers. Towns grew and new markets developed.

Some figures to illustrate this growth

(all facts taken from Pioneers of Modern Design - by Nickolaus Pevsner.)

The Production of Iron in England.

1740	-	17,000	tons.
1788	-	68,000	tons.
1802	-	170,000	tons.
1830	-	678,000	tons.

### The Export of Cotton.

1701	it was valued at	£23,500
1764	it was valued at	£200,000
1790	it was valued at	£1,500,000
1833	it was valued at	£18,000,000
1840	it was valued at	£26,500,000

### Increase in Population in Birmingham.

1700	-	15,000
1807	-	73,000
1841	-	183,000

In the midst of this sudden growth no time was left to refine all those innumerable innovations which swamped producer and consumer.

With this hastened decline of craft skills the shape and appearance of all products was left to the uneducated manufacturer. Working conditions were bleaker than ever before in European history. Working hours were between twelve and fourteen, children were employed from their fifth and sixth year onwards.

'The new evil that made the factory ghastly was different it was the domination of man by the pace of machines. The workers for the first time were driven by an inhuman clockwork, the power first of water then of steam'

from *The Ascent of Man* by Jacob Bronowski.

The Industrial Revolution had changed England from a village based agrarian society to an urban manufacturing society.

'Manufacturers were by means of machinery enable to turn out thousands of cheap articles in the same time and at the same cost as were formerly required for the production of one well made object. Sham materials and sham techniques were dominant throughout. Skilled craftsmanship was replaced by mechanical routine.

From the Pioneers of Modern Design by Nikolaus Pevsner.

It was against the inhumane pace of life that was forced and the ugliness of industrial art that Morris reacted.

He stated that 'it is not possible to dissociate art from morality politics and religion'. His notion of art derives from his knowledge of medieval conditions of work, he was a faithful follower of Ruskin who in turn owed a debt to Pugin who fought for Gothic forms as the only Christian forms and for honesty and truth-fulness in design and manufacturing.

After the Renaissance the artist had become according to Schiller 'the high priest of a secular society', totally denying his link with craftsmanship. The artist began to despise utility and the public (Keats 'O Sweet fancy let her loose, everything is spoilt by use'). He shut himself off from the real life of his time, creating art for art's sake.

One of the first British writers to understand the nature of the forces that were transforming society and to criticise them with consistent insight was Carlyle who defined his position in 'signs of the Times' published in 1829 in the Edinburgh Review.

'Our old modes of exertion are all discredited and thrown aside. On every hand the living artisan is driven from his workshop to make room for a speedier ~~in~~animate one. The shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver and falls into Iron fingers that ply it faster. For all earthly, and for some unearthly purpose we have machines and mechanic furtherances ..... We remove

mountains and make seas our smooth highway, nothing can resist us. We war with rude Nature, and by our restless engines come off victorious and loaded with spoils..... Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also. Here too, nothing follows its spontaneous course nothing is left to be accomplished by old natural methods... .. Men are grown mechanical in head and heart as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour and in natural force of any kind.'

The 'Arts and Crafts' movement reacted strongly to this situation looking back to pre-Renaissance times for its ideologocial ancestors. It was the philosophy of the Medieval Craftsman, who was proud of executing any, Commission to the best of his ability, that there rebels followed. Out of the rumpus came some enduring values which stood the movement in good stead and also proved appropriate to industry - a respect for material and the enhancement of its qualities.

William Morris.      E.

William Morris was born on March 24, 1834 at Walthamstow a small village close to Epping Forest. He was the eldest son of a wealthy businessman and he fought throughout his life the indolence and lack of incentive that often goes with wealth and comfort. He was the founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

While at Oxford he formed around himself a circle of friends among them Edward Burne Jones and Charles Faulkner, who were forming similar opinions to himself about the art and architecture of the day. These young idealists who had formed the Birmingham Colony at Oxford were well aware of the similarity of intention between their own group and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood' - Ruskin.

'Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle that of absolute uncompromising truth of all it does, obtained by working everything down to the most, minute detail from nature only'.

On leaving Oxford Burne Jones had decided to become a painter and Morris an architect. He articulated himself to G.E. Street and after nine months working as an architect, he decided to become a painter.

Ultimately instead of forming a new exclusive brotherhood of artists as he had wished to found when he was studying at Oxford, Morris decided to open a firm, Morris, Marshall and Faulkner Fine Art workmen in Painting, Carving, Furniture and Metals. The work that the firm normally became involved in, came from private commissions either for stained glass, furniture or interiors.

The meaning of Morris firm and Morris doctrine is clearly expressed in the thirty-five lectures which he delivered between 1877 and 1884 on social and artistic questions. It was the social condition of art that interested him.

'Real art is made by the people, for the people, as a happiness for the maker and the user'. Morris' theory carries Art from purely aesthetic considerations to the wider field of social science. During middle-life Morris took up politics and in 1884 helped found the socialist league, he travelled up and down the country delivering hundreds of lectures to groups of workmen, Morris and his fellow socialists were criticized in the press of the day.

'In their dreams for the future the early English Socialists sought nothing but gentle Christian Paradise after, their own kindly middle-class hearts'

Sir Arthur Bryant in the English Saga.

When the Socialist league was taken over by anarchists, Morris withdrew from the active politics. Morris' influence as a thinker and social philosopher has had wider and deeper influence than Morris the designer though one of the basic tenets of his design philosophy was that 'the designer (or architect) must have a personal knowledge of the potentials and limitations of the materials he is working with if he is to produce work of any validity and such understanding of the process of design, must be learned at first hand'.

An idea which Sir Misha Black RDI Professor of Industrial Design

(Engineering) at the Royal College of Art retired in the July 1972 issue of the Times Higher Education Supplement.

'A period of handwork is I believe essential to the development of all designers even if they are destined eventually to work in the more cerebral design disciplines. The subtle differences between two dissimilar surfaces the problems of the penetration of a large three-dimensional form into a larger element, the transmutation of a circular plane into a rectangular plane can only be appreciated by the physical exertion of personally resolving these problems in malleable materials'.

The more immediate effects of Morris' teachings was that several young artists and architects decided to devote their lives to the crafts, among them Voysey, Ashbee and Lethaby and De Morgan.

It is extremely significant that between 1880 and 1890 five societies for the promotion of artistic craftsmanship were started.

- 1882 Arthur H. Machmurdos' Century Guild.
- 1884 The Artworkers Guild.
- 1884 Home Arts and Industries Association.
- 1888 Ashbees Guild and School of Handcraft.
- 1888 The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society.

Morris died in 1885 and the founding of these bodies, ensured the continuation of his philosophy of craftsmanship, Lethaby took over as spokesman for the movement.

In 1896 the Central School of Arts and Crafts was founded with Lethaby as joint principal and in 1900 he became the first Professor of Design at the Royal College of Art. Two years



later in 1902 a group of craftsmen moved out to Chipping Camden to practice honest handwork in rural simplicity and founded the Cotswold Tradition.

Morris and the 20th Century. F.

The English Arts and Crafts movement had cast its influence wide in Europe influencing Van der Velde in Belgium , Art Nouveau in France and ultimately the Bauhaus in Germany after the first world war.

The humanizing of technology and the harnessing of its achievements towards social ends inspired the pioneers of the 20th century. Theories of design up to the Great War were dominated by the craft tradition.

After 1914 design for machine production became the centre of attention and the industrial designers drew similar conclusions to those of the early craftworkers i.e. a respect for material and a concern for function.

Bernard Leach. G.

Along with the strong influence of Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, the Japanese experience of renewal in the crafts has had persistent and profound influence on our own views of craftsmanship and the artist craftsman.

Bernard Leach as interpreter for the Western World, of the Japanese movement has more consistently than any other artist advocated the values of hand-craft making.

Although educated in England, having trained as an artist at the Slade, he had a profound insight into the philosophy of Japanese folk art.

On travelling to Japan in 1911, aged 24, with the intention of teaching etching, he found himself drawn into the Japanese pottery tradition. At this very time in Japan there was taking place a remarkable ,resurrection of interest in traditional folk-art. This revaluation of traditional work was led by Soetsu Yanagi, a leading intellectual of the day, and was ultimately to become a close friend of Leaches'.

Having apprenticed himself to an old potter (the sixth Kenzan) Leach hoped to learn the traditional dying skills. He spent nine years in study, travelling both to China and Japan while there, he ultimately intended to return to England and set up a studio pottery. In 1920, he got back to England, bringing Shoji Hamada, a young Japanese potter with him. They both set set about starting the pottery in St. Ives in Cornwall.

The ground had been prepared well for Leach, by the pioneering work of the followers of Morris. Having returned to England he attempted to discover and revive the dying craft pottery tradition, which lingered on in a few of the remaining country potteries.

A year before Hamada returned to Japan, Leach was joined at St. Ives by a young Oxford graduate, Michael Cardew. Cardew himself was to have an even greater influence in reviving the English Slipware tradition, when in 1926 he set up the Winchcombe Pottery. More than any other Leach was able to show the way beyond the limited role advocated by the Bauhaus to the craftsman and he established an independent and vital role for him in an industrial society.

In fact it was the potters, Leach, Cardew, and their students Ray Finch, Harry and May Davis, who proved the viability of the crafts as a means of livelihood, which was one of the tenets of William Morris' philosophy.

The development of the crafts came slowly between the wars, and in 1928 the Contemporary Arts Society set up a fund to present pottery and other craftwork to public galleries, nevertheless the austerity of post-war England had a bad effect on craftwork. The dedicated few maintained a consistent flow of work to the galleries that had been established.

In 1948, a major step in consolidating the existence of craftwork, was taken in the founding of the Crafts Council of Great Britain. It was helped along by a small grant from John Farleigh a member

of the Board of Trade, its objectives were 'the preservation, promotion and improvement of the work of designer - craftsmen in the fine arts' and to establish, a national crafts centre in London.

By 1960 the Craftsmens' Potter's Association had its own shop in London, thus establishing a good outlet for the many potters who had followed in the footsteps of Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew.

The English example has encouraged many countries towards a critical valuation of craftwork and they have paved the way to the establishment of many bodies similiar to their own Crafts Council.

We here in Ireland are late starters but since the setting up of the Kilkenny Design Workshops and the more comprehensive system of Art Education there seems to be greater moves towards fortifying the craftworkers role in our society. Many more craftsmen are setting up studios in this country and resulting from this the standard of work is improving .

The Value of Handwork H.

Having attempted to trace the emergence of what we know as the artist craftsman. I would like to finish with what I believe to be the value of handcraft-making in the face of high speed mass production.

The art of the craftsman is intuitive and humanistic, it is essentially man centred and personal (one pair of hands, one brain) industrial work is anonymous, and lacks the intimate qualities which hand-work possesses.

Each method has its own aesthetic significance.

The mass produced article has sacrificed the intimacy of personality, for cheapness and ease of production, similiarly good handwork has become a luxury in our society, it is expensive, thus handcraft-work has become elitist, being far too expensive for the majority of the people.

I conclude with a statement from the mexican writer Octavio Paz;

"since it is a thing made by human hands the craft object preserves the fingerprints be they real or metaphorical - of the artisan who fashioned it. These imprints are not the signature of the artist; they are not a name, nor are they a trademark. Rather they are a sign, the scarcely visible scar commemorating the original brotherhood of men and their seperation".

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