

NICK JAFFE

## INTRODUCTION

Humans are makers; craft has always been at the center of our making. Whether consciously or unconsciously, our subjective way of seeing the world becomes part of anything we make. We cannot make things without in some way embedding ourselves.

By “craft” I mean a combination of function-driven design and aesthetics; a direct connection (real or imagined) between the maker and the user; and an implied universality—we are all constantly engaged in some type of “crafting,” whether we acknowledge it as such or not. There are and must be specialists in crafting, but it has never been the province of specialists alone.

In his exhaustive, brilliant and provocative book *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*, biologist and artist R. Dale Guthrie (Guthrie, R. D. (2005). *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press) makes a compelling argument that cave and other Paleolithic art, far from being the province of shamans or specialists was made by children, adolescents and likely everyone. Functional art was part of the picture from the beginning too. His book is full of illustrations of arrow-straighteners and other tools decorated with tremendous skill and often a great sense of humor. Ancient makers would use the shape of tools or the cracks in rocks to create visual double-entendres and depict such absurdities as animals eating their own tails. Life for people living 30,000 years ago appears to have been full of craft and art in spite of what must have been a very difficult and often precarious existence.

The development of agriculture and some measure of material surplus made a division of labor in society both possible and necessary. Technique in such areas as pottery, weaving, wood and iron working became more complex and craft became a more specialized activity. In many cultures an artisan class emerged along with codified methods of production that could be passed on through generations. But even as the production of some objects became more specialized, design and aesthetics became ever more generalized. Abstractions, symbols, and specific design elements often served to unite and even define, social and political groups—villages, clans, tribes and kingdoms—even as these same groups began to divide along gender, vocational and class lines. Style emerged as a way of defining the collective, and as an element of culture. Style also functioned as way for even the non-artisan/specialist to create personal objects that could relate to the larger cultural context.

So, from the dawn of class society there has been both a synergy and tension between “art” and “craft.” The naturalistic and often humorous art of Paleolithic people seems to have flowed almost effortlessly between the “canvas” of cave walls

and the surfaces of all-important, highly functional tools. With Mesolithic and later agricultural societies both naturalistic and increasingly abstract signs continued to adorn functional objects but also began to serve other social and aesthetic purposes as religious or magical symbols, and as symbols of power and status. The emergence of mercantile capitalism meant that the expertise of the craftsman became an economic factor and the objects he/she produced became commodities with an economic value and significance that might bear little relationship to their utility. The ritual and secrecy of the guild system in medieval Europe, or similar institutions elsewhere were the expression of an economic tension—if everyone is potentially a “maker,” then the only way to convert expertise and technique into exchange value is to hold it very closely.

Industrial capitalism brought even greater changes to both the methods and meanings of artisanship and an increasingly radical division between “art” and “craft.” Ruling classes were no longer content to simply possess the most rare, valuable and labor-intensive products of artisans; they began to elevate “non-functional” aesthetic expression to an exalted, even divine status. Just as technique and production methods in the crafts in many cultures and places were reaching unprecedented levels of refinement and complexity, the craftsman was increasingly debased as “less than an artist.” The advent of mechanized mass production threatened to do away with artisanship all together except perhaps as an exotic luxury for a very few.

The early days of working class struggle against capital also saw a reaction by the artisan class and its champions in the intelligentsia against the marginalization of craft. In the early 19th Century the Luddites—militant textile artisans in England—smashed the new power looms in protest. The Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th and early 20th Century united artisans and designers from England to America and Japan in a cultural struggle to restore the dignity and artistry of artisanship with the goal of providing finely made functional objects to the working masses. Many innovations in design and objects of breathtaking beauty and elegance came out of the Arts and Crafts Movement. But ultimately the desperate struggle of the Luddites and the utopian visions of a William Morris were doomed to failure. Industrial production may be under the control of a capitalist class that sacrifices the artisan’s artistry on the altar of profit without a second thought; but industrial production does not exist because of those capitalists. Rather industrial production exists as a consequence of humanity’s struggle to satisfy its basic, human needs—food, shelter, life, freedom and the leisure time with which to do things that satisfy and fulfill us. In the hands of the many industrial production can be a tremendous force for human liberation, and therefore also for artistic and craft innovation and expression.

In the 1920’s the artists, architects, designers and students of the radical Bauhaus School in Germany and the Vkhutemas State Art and Technical School in the early USSR took up the banner of the craftsman on a new plane—that of embracing industrial production as a means of producing beautiful, high quality, functional objects on a mass scale so that they could be used and enjoyed by all working people.

The profound impact that the Bauhaus and Vkhutemas have had on art and design can be seen everywhere in the world today. Walk down the aisles of a “big box store” and with virtually every “modern” product of industrial design, no matter how half-assed or how brilliant, odds are you can trace at least part of its aesthetic and production lineage to the Bauhaus or a related modernist school or movement.

It is no coincidence that the Bauhaus and Vkhutemas were based on the premise that all men and women are “talented” and capable of effective work and expression in any medium given time and practice. It is no coincidence that these schools and movements explicitly fought to erase the artificial schism between “high art” and craft. It is no coincidence that modernist movements like these closely studied the craft traditions, aesthetic methods of many different societies and cultures including those of contemporary hunting and subsistence agricultural societies, and Paleolithic art. And finally it is no coincidence that even through the repressive political regimes of the Stalinist era, arts and crafts training was a central part of virtually every child’s education in the USSR with no reference to the capitalist question of whether such training was appropriate for kids who might not become professional artists or craftsmen.

These are not coincidences because industrial production has exploded the lie that art is the product of divine inspiration and craft is for the “simple folk.” That is not to say the this lie isn’t still given currency by the rich and powerful—we see it borne out in a thousand ways every day in American society, where public education is increasingly viewed by the ruling class as a necessary evil—job skills and disciplinary training for the poor, the brown and the black. The ruling class may see education as a means to a profitable end, but the rest of us know better. Throughout this history of the marginalization of craft in many cultures, we have all continued to make things; things that matter to us; things we can use but things that also express our shared subjective experience. And as craft becomes less and less a part of increasingly mechanized, computer-controlled production, it becomes clearer to us that the value of a crafted object has never been measurable in dollars or even just in terms of its utility. Humans make things beautifully, interestingly, expressively because that is what it means to be human. Making is satisfying; it is fun; it can be shared. What the painter does is what the potter does; what the car customizer does is what the sculptor does; what the weaver does is what the photographer does.

And now we are in a strange, fascinating and unprecedented time. This collection of insightful, engaging and highly useful articles make that clear in so many ways. We have not solved the problem of putting industrial production in the service of the many, of want, of freedom, of life; craft will not do that for us though art and craft will certainly play a role as they have in every human struggle. But just the same, amidst the oppression, war, hunger and environmental destruction a strange and wonderful bridging of the technological gap is taking place between the centers of mass production and the places “ordinary people” find themselves outside of work—home, school, community center, library, hospital, prison. Craft has always

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existed in these places, often in great depth and richness. But something is new. Mass production and new technologies have given us unprecedented access to some of the most advanced methods of making. Alongside the potters wheel we find a relatively inexpensive laptop computer with enough processing power to operate 10 space shuttles simultaneously. For less than a dollar we can obtain super bright LED's; for twenty dollars a microcontroller that can automate a home or damn near anything else you can think of. With a 3D printer costing less than \$700.00 our most fanciful pencil drawings can emerge in space as objects we can hold and use. Every image we make, every piece of music we record, has an instant potential audience of billions via the web.

And, as if by magic, the ethos and techniques that are driving the way these objects are understood, used and enjoyed by “regular people” is the timeless one of craft. Far from displacing artistic values or older methods, these new technologies and approaches are giving them new life and new potential. Far from alienating young people from cultural traditions of the past the DIY movement and maker spaces seem to be hotbeds of old-school and new school—scratch that! They are crucibles in which such distinctions are evaporating along with the false division of art and craft. Old and new tools are just tools and all making is potentially artful and expressive. The work of both “newbies” and experts, in maker spaces, in rich and poor neighborhoods, in cities and remote villages, asserts over and over the essential truth of craft—that all people are makers and all people are artful in their making.