

Why is craft a dirty word

Zachary dunlap

Design craft

The word craft is very ambiguous, it exists as both an adjective and a verb. You can craft a material, while you may also embark upon the endeavour of craft. It is broadly defined as an activity involving skill in making things by hand. Unfortunately It would seem that it's this broad collection of things that can be called craft that have cheapened the overall appearance of value of contemporary craft in a modern world. In a 1968 issue of *Objects:USA*, Curator Lee Nordness wrote in an omnibus: "the term crafts confusedly connotes in many peoples minds, something that's done as an avocation, something done as a therapy, something done by the aged. Actually, what is being created by the top artisans in the United States should be associated with such names as Benvenuto Cellini, Faberge, and Paul Revere".

In the creative world, craft is usually looked at with a sense of inferiority to other disciplines of art and design. In fact the true reasons for this can be linked back as early as the beginning of the French Renaissance humanism movement in the late 1400s. Before this time French artisans were driven mostly by the desires of the wealthy, producing fine and lavish works using generationally honed skills and craftsmanship. <site> These artists worked in collectives as the fame of their name was that which drove the value of the works that they produced. But as the humanism movement was growing, artists began to reformulate classic works based upon the creativity of individuals. Breaking away from these collectives and demanding payment for their works based upon merit. Craft and fine art began to separate as collective production became less widespread than individual artistic production.<site>

Much later in the mid- late 1800s William Morris, Ruskin, Walter Crane, C.R. Ashbee most notably among others, started the Arts and Crafts movement. This movement was a point when artists and craftspeople working in the decorative and applied fields at the time were pressing for recognition by the Royal Academy. However, they organised a separate exhibition on their own when their claims were refused. The exhibition was originally suggested by Ruskin in 1878 and was built upon the shoulders of a wave of over a hundred new craftsmen of the age. First known as the "combined arts" they eventually changed their name to Arts and Crafts. They believed it signified more specifically the union of artistic creation and the industry for which the society stood for. (chapters in the Arts and Crafts movement trigg p.82)

The difference in pricing between fine art and craft continued to shift as well, popular works of art beginning to fetch a much higher price, while craftwork from artisans continued to be paid by the metre, or pot, or tile. The way these two types of creation are priced in modern times can be vastly different. In 2019 artist Maurizio Cattelan's piece "comedian" was unveiled at the art Bazel festival in Miami, which was in fact a banana simply duck taped to the wall. While this is seen as a statement about the contemporary art climate as well as consumerism and hype driven art, the fact remains that this work sold repeatedly for £120,000. Here in this instance, we can see where an art piece is valued solely for its concept and standing amongst other art works of a similar nature with no consideration to material costs of the artist or actual labour. In fact, Cattelan was quoted as saying "The banana is supposed to be a banana, however the shape of the fruit, the angle it was taped to the wall and its placement in the booth were all carefully considered." Despite the artists consideration, the value of raw material for this work would easily be under £3 and the skill required to accomplish this project would be minimal. It could be argued that the placement of the banana was something requiring a great amount of skill but in truth it is probably negligible. To look at value in this way is a subjective value point of view, <site> which bases the value of this artwork upon an assumption of what other similar artworks are worth.

The labour theory of value as written by Karl Marx however, (site) states that 'the value of an object is a result of the labour expended to produce it.' Looking at value in this way, the value of the "comedian" would simply be the hours required to go to the shop, purchase the banana and the duck tape and then tape it to the wall. The intrinsic value of craftwork on the other hand, seems to be tied to amount of labour hours in addition to the material cost of production and basic overhead costs. In 2019 Ceramic artist Danny Meisinger created a 43cm high Ceramic vase called "embrace" Which sold for \$2500 in America. The vase is made from stoneware and at the top two silhouettes have been sculpted holding each other in an embrace. The price of this very large vase will probably cover the cost of the clay, glazing materials, labour time as well as the experience and skill of this potter but not much more. Throwing large pottery on a wheel requires the kind of control and material understanding that can only come with time, as well as many hours of drying and working in between stages to build height and then alter the form to add the sculptured silhouettes.

Danny Meissenger is a famous modern potter and artist in the same ways as cattelan so why such a difference in price. Perhaps in a modern society where items are readily and easily available, craft has begun to lose value where meaning and hype are desirable. Perhaps because we have become disassociated with craft as a society, we have begun to devalue it on the whole. Working with materials some say is engrained into our being as many of our ancestors would have used tools to accomplish tasks in order to survive. Could it be that these skills we allow to die off are the reason craft is becoming less desirable? Making and using tools is one of the key factors that sets the human race apart from the rest of the creatures on this planet.

Craft is also often used to define moribund human skills that are either completely lost or being actively protected such as Welsh Coracle making. A Welsh coracle is a small, round one-man canoe. Made with willow or ash that is woven like a basket, and with a reinforced inner structure and then covered on the outside with skin in such a way that allows the coracle to float on the top of the water. <site>However the salmon that these coracle fishermen used to fish for are now permanently protected due to low stocks and environmental changes and so sadly there is no longer a practical need for this craft. Another example of this view of craft could be the extinction of an entire UK skill in 2017 when Ron Macdonald (no relation or connection to the hamburger clown) died, taking with him a lifetime of knowledge being the last mould and deckle maker in the UK. Mould and deckle making was the hand building of mahogany frames for use in hand making paper. <site>

All craftsmanship is built upon a skill that has been developed through trial and error to a very high degree. (Richard sennet) Once the craftsman has begun to master their skill, the level of problem solving moves from very simply completing the project, to working out the finer points of finishing or even innovation in design that would have been previously impossible. So the craftsman becomes a person striving for perfection in skill, and almost never satisfied, constantly bettering processes and refining elements of their craft.

isaak stern “the better your technique, the more impossible your standards.”

Understanding a little more about craft’s relationship to materials we can even begin to draw parallels between hand craft and all-other area of creation that could be viewed as craft. You could argue a musician is a craftsman using his musical instruments as tools to craft a musical composition, or that a landscaper is a craftsman using huge machinery and moving hundreds of tonnes of earth to create a beautiful landscape.

What is fascinating is that within all craftspeople there appears to be a possible underlying commonality. What people of craft seem to share is a material intelligence. Material intelligence is the idea that some people can achieve an almost measurable material literacy or a comprehensive understanding of material and process. This implies a very deep ability to read the world that surrounds them as a material environment, and the ability to give it a new form.<site>.

Material intelligence is not necessarily craftsmanship, but an understanding of the environment around us and how the things that we interact with on a daily basis are created, which in turn influences decisions in how we select material to craft with. Selection of material and material understanding are extremely important to craftspeople, while basic material understanding can give you a finished product, knowledge and experience can lead to understanding the true nuances\potential of a material. A fantastic example of that is Handmade spoon maker <site> who especially prizes the wood made from the bent branches of trees, which are usually sawn from timber and consigned to the chipping pile.

While generally seen as waste, it's the natural bend in these branches that provide the material for the very best spoons. The reason for this is the natural curvature of the grain which allows the wood fibres to perfectly run along the entire length of the bowl section of the spoon. This piece being used for carving instead of just standard wooden billet will create a much stronger shape, a spoon that will last generations, rather than simply a few years. In this way material selection is influenced by material intelligence contributing to a much better overall design.

Craft is very much for the present and future, often times with the lines between craft and technology actually being blurred. <site> This is true in areas such as computer programming where programmers designing linux software are architects of their material. Through mastery of their tools, which in this instance would be a computer, they can craft incredibly complex programs that work effortlessly.

Today craft is quietly evolving before our eyes. Immediate information exchange via the internet allows people to collaborate, share, learn, teach in a way never seen before.

Mass production seems to be giving way to a sort of middle production in which craftspeople are able to produce enough work to sustain a relatively high turnover business, that employing numbers of staff while still offering work that reflects their high level of craftsmanship. A great example of this is

This middle production may very well be the future for craft. Fossil fuels on the planet are a finite resource <site>. Every day energy costs rise, with worldwide renewable energy efforts falling short of targets across the board. The bubble of cheap transportation will eventually burst. At some point it may no longer be cheaper to acquire a mass produced, Chinese porcelain dinner set than dinnerware made from locally sourced materials by a craftsperson in the UK simply because the cost of the energy required to move the object outweighs the value of the item.

