

**Question 2: Define skill in the context of your own practice and the work of two artists/makers/designers from the lecture series. (2,500).**

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Skill can be defined as “the knowledge and ability that enables you to do something well” (Collins Dictionary, N/A). For example, the neatness of a stitch depends on the skill of the seamstress and the quality of a print depends on the skill of the screen printer. Skill is something which we value as artists, something that we intuitively use in our everyday craft and this definition suggests that the amount of skill is what determines the result and outcome of the thing being crafted. However, the question that has and continues to trouble artists and creators, of all kinds, is ‘does the value of something originate from the hand which it was made with - and does this value increase or decrease with the use of technology?’ This question was very important to art critic John Ruskin and designer William Morris who, during the industrial revolution, advocated that the value of a crafted object comes from the hand which made it, opposing the idea that a machine-made product could hold as much value as something created by hand. However, machines and technology are so useful for artists today as tools to experiment and investigate with. Many artists use technology and handicraft in tandem, valuing both as methods of creative expression, including artists Rose Sinclair and Emma Lacey.

Ever since the industrial revolution, the value of hand-making has been threatened by mass production using a machine. The transition from handicraft to mass production was brought about by the contemporary society’s growing urge to “get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction” (Benjamin, 1934, p.5), meaning that mass consumerism was a huge factor behind the triggering of industrial reproduction. As a result of mass production and industrialisation becoming



Fig One

increasing popular, a rebellion movement was created called ‘The Arts and Crafts Movement’ which was “the revival, by a few artists, of hand-craft as opposed to machine-craft, and be defined to be the insistence on the worth of man's hand...” (Cobden-Sanderson, 2010, p.3). Two of the primary proponents of the Arts and Crafts Movement were Ruskin and Morris. Morris is one of the most iconic figures within the Arts and Crafts Movement and in the world of design in general, best known for his woodblock printed stylised floral wallpapers. Morris valued the use of traditional processes, like vegetable dyeing and woodblock printing because these methods were done by hand, and he disliked the idea of factory-made products devaluing handicraft. He worried that design would become something just for profit and not for enjoyment and that the popularization of machinery would de-skill crafters (Harvey and Press, 1996, p.19). Morris was an advocate of keeping the art of making alive, believing that even ordinary and everyday objects

were beautiful and valuable if made by hand (Morris, 1888, p.607). Morris appreciated the work of Ruskin who was an artist, philosopher and art critic who wrote texts on a variety of subjects including hand made craft. His passion for handicraft is evident in his text 'The Seven Lamps of Architecture' in which Ruskin discusses the importance of man-made construction, especially in regards to architecture. In the second chapter, called "The Lamp of Truth", Ruskin addresses his reasons for being against machine making and makes the argument that "there are two reasons... that all cast and machine work is bad, as work; the other, that it is dishonest" (Ruskin, 1911, p.36), this clearly shows that Ruskin does not see value in machine made work. Ruskin even declares that cast-iron works like those found on some roofs and churches are "not architecture at all" (Ruskin, 1911, p.29). Ruskin believes there are traces of fallacy and deceit which comes with using machinery to create something which could be made by hand. According to Ruskin, it is dishonest for something to look like it has been made by hand when it has in fact been made using a machine. Furthermore, Ruskin describes that although there may be no physical difference between something which is handmade and manmade, a handcrafted item will have a "sense of human labour and care spent upon it" (Ruskin, 1911, p.36). According to Ruskin, this 'sense' can be felt rather than seen in the product that is made by hand and "Its true delightfulness depends on our discovering in it the record of thoughts, and intents, and trials, and heart-breakings—of recoveries and joyfulnesses of success" (Ruskin, 1911, p.37) which its machine made counterpart lacks. The value of the handmade outcome can be found in the emotions and sentiments which it holds and these sentiments can only be given through the process of hand making and by the skill of the maker. This idea of sentiments being attached to an original piece can be linked to Walter Benjamin and his theories about aura.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Benjamin stated that "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin, 1935, p.3), and this unique existence "originates from the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" (Benjamin, 1935, p.3). This would suggest that Benjamin believes that the original piece would carry more value than the reproduced version because of its background, its history and its story. A modern day example of this could be purchasing a print of an art piece from the Tate Museum, the print is still capturing the piece but in a flat 2-D format which means you cannot see the brush strokes, the pencil marks, the story of how the artist created their piece which is what evokes the unique existence. Therefore, this unique existence or "aura" (Benjamin, 1935, p.4), as it is referred to later in the text, is what "withers in the age of mechanical reproduction" (Benjamin, 1934, p.4). So when an original is reproduced it is not only offensive as a substitute due to the lack of uniqueness and aura but also damaging to the integrity of the original. This exchange of the unique existence being substituted for exhibition value was to facilitate the "desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly" (Benjamin, 1934, p.5). To add to this, John Berger in his text "Ways of Seeing" suggests that the value of something originates from the intention, given by the artist, behind the piece. Berger explains that "European art between 1500 and 1900 served the interests of the successive ruling class" (Berger, 1972, p.86). The artworks were becoming more and more like commodities, things to satisfy the capital market and feed the consumerism desires of wealthy people. Berger says that "to have a thing painted and put on a canvas is not unlike buying it and putting it in your house" (Berger, 1972, p.83), for wealthy people the paintings were a visual demonstration of their wealth, their money and their possessions. This ideology, according to Berger, had an effect on the value of the art. He writes "the value it was nominally expressing were less meaningful to the painter than the finishing of the commission" (Berger, 1972, p.88). This means that the art became only pursuits of profit and the paintings began to lose their artistic value as even the artists began to see their paintings as commodities. Therefore, the distinguishability of an object made by hand and an object made by a machine was lost because the artists became like robots, thoughtlessly producing paintings with only the intention of being sold to feed consumerism. The artists, like machines, began creating

without passion and intention which resulted in a lack of value within their work. Ruskin was also concerned about this, describing that “it was possible for men to turn themselves into machines, and to reduce their labor to the machine level” (Ruskin, 1911, p.163) but Ruskin believed this could be avoided if it is made with passion because the maker is putting their “heart into what they do” (Ruskin, 1911, p.163).

However, some would argue that advancements in technology and machinery has improved the craft of the craftsman as it has bettered the crafting experience, our communication and our lifestyle in general. Richard Sennet in “The Craftsman” explains how technology has “infinitely improved, the quality of our lives; more and better medicines, houses, food— an endless list” (Sennet, 2009, p.83). Moreover, Sennet gives an example of how machinery actually improved a making procedure which was the process of paper pulping. The process adopted in the eighteenth century was dirty and foul for the workers but with the introduction of mechanical tools, paper pulping became a much more sanitary and enjoyable operation (Sennet, 2009, p.89). He even suggests that the use of mechanical tools allowed hand makers and their craft to increase in value because “human virtues of restraint and simplicity came to the fore as man’s contribution to human culture; none of these sentiments could be called mechanical” (Sennet, 2009, p.83). This implies that the separation between machine-made and hand-made allowed people to realise the worth of something which is made by hand, becoming enlightened to The Arts and Crafts Movement. Even Ruskin, in his disgust towards machine made mass production products, admits to the usefulness of iron casted architectural elements writing “Yet it is evident that metals may, and sometimes must, enter into the construction to a certain extent, as nails in wooden architecture...” (Ruskin, 1911, p.45). This implies that the craftsman and the machine can work together in harmony and still create something of value. This idea of finding a middle ground between technology and people is supported by textile artist Rose Sinclair and ceramicist Emma Lacey.

Sinclair is a lecturer at Goldsmiths University of London who is a researcher on the impact of CAD/CAM and ICT in textiles technology including developing new approaches to computerised embroidery and how technology has positively affected the world of design and textiles (Sinclair, 2015, p.523). But, she is also involved in a project researching the traditional textile networking systems of ‘Dorcas Clubs’ used by Caribbean women in the UK between the fifties and sixties and the cultural and storytelling significance behind the textiles they would create. Sinclair sees machinery as an avenue for enhancing the crafting experience and outcomes. Sinclair makes connections between computer coding and knitting, explaining that there is a three element process used in both craft and technology making which involves the hardware such as the knitting needles, the schematic or the outcome like a pair of socks and the instructions like the code on a computer. It is possible to exchange any of these elements, for example you could exchange the schematic of a pair of socks to a dress pattern or exchange the knitting needles for a sewing



Fig Two

machine. This analogy suggests that there is no difference in making with the hand or making with the machine, crafting is about the process and the output. Moreover, Sinclair also does research into emerging technology and how it has allowed design to experiment and explore beyond art and benefit the world of medicine with 3D printed organs and 3D embroidery medical implants (Sinclair, 2020). It is undeniable that both technological processes and handicraft processes require skill and create valuable outcomes, and often these processes are used together to create something of even more value. To add to this, an essay on Etsy, one of the biggest selling platforms for artists, claims that “where machine technology was an issue for many in the Arts and Crafts movement, some contemporary craftspeople use technology to connect with each other and to make new kinds of crafts, but traditional skills and tools are still valued” (Krugh, 2014, p. 290-291). Krugh implies that the value is not diminished by the use of technology but instead should be used as a tool like traditional tools and skills to better craft and the crafting experience, like in Sennet’s example of the paper pulping. Another artist who has discovered the value of using technology and hand making together is Emma Lacey. Lacey is a ceramicist specialising in dinnerware who “has worked to combine technology with the hand, scanning elements of her thrown vessels and then modelling in CAD” (Emma Lacey, 2020). Ceramics is an intimate process for an artist as the clay is shaped and moulded by hand but advocates of the Arts and Crafts Movement might argue that the ‘personal touch’ of the hand crafted ceramics will become tainted with the use of an industrial porcelain and the use of CAD. Yet, Lacey has created a series of ceramics called “Tacit” which directly address the



Fig Three

relationship between the crafter and the made object. The pieces in the “Tacit” collection all have a small thumb-sized dent in the centre front and the purpose of this dent is to invite the mug’s owner to get to know the product. The dented surface conjures up thoughts and questions about where the clay originated from and how the mug was made, acting as a constant reminder of the mug’s maker and the value of craft. In a way this is an industrially made product because it is reproduced and made in abundance to satisfy the masses and yet the carefully considered design element of the dent on each mug reinforces the idea of the craftsman and their presence within their craft. This example shows how human sentiments can remain in a reproduced product.

In conclusion, I believe that artists should not be an “enemy” (Sennet, 2009, p.81) of the machine but instead we must find a balance between hand making and using technology, taking time to appreciate the traditional methods of craft as influences on our current crafting methods. In surface pattern design, we use a variety of technology such as digital fabric printers, laser cutters and computer programs like Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator but we also use windows as lightboxes and create hand rendered repeats with only a pencil, a ruler, scissors and tape. One of our most used processes in the surface pattern department

is screen printing in which we use both technology and our hands during the process. We use an exposure unit to expose the emulsion on the silk screen but we also grease, degrease, coat, print and often draw the stencil for the silk screens by hand. I think there is a balance that artists must find between tech and hand which allows the value and maker's skill to not be lost. For example, this is a pigment discharge print that I made recently as part of my Major project. Although technology was used to create the screen, there is a hand-made quality which remains with the hand-drawn stencil and the blotches where the bleach did not fully react with the paper because of the pressure I applied to the squeegee when printing. Elements like the slightly raised print texture left on a screen printed wallpaper or the sewn hem on a t-shirt or, in my case, the blotchiness of a pigment discharge print are all small reminders of the craft story behind the object. These are everyday visual and touchable aids to remind us of the value and the skill of the crafter. Human sentiments can only become obvious when we look close enough. Therefore, I believe that nothing, not even technology, can remove the value and skill of the craftsman.



Fig Four

**Figures.**

Fig. One: Morris, W and Webb, P. (1862) *Trellis Wallpaper* [woodblock wallpaper]. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig. Two: Ellis, J. (n/a) *The Nottingham Hood* [3D embroidery medical implant]. Available at: <https://www.ellisdev.co.uk/shouldr.html> (Accessed: 03 December 2020).

Fig. Three: Lacey, E. (2020) *Tacit* [ceramic mug]. Available at: <https://www.emmalacey.com/tacit> (Accessed: 03 December 2020).

Fig. Four: Yeomans, G.L. (2020) *Art Deco Abstract Print* [discharge pigment print].

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