

Research in Context

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(Word count: 2558)

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BA Design Crafts

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Submission date: 31/12/2024

Submission ID: ADAD5003/C – Research in Context

File name: Research in Context Essay – Seren Trodden

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The role of the craftsperson today still remains essentially as it was 100 years ago – to combine the most satisfying appearance and aesthetic qualities of an object with the most efficient and accessible functionality. However, the technological advances and complexities of 21st Century living have placed increasingly commercial and intellectual demands on designers and makers. In addition, the development of AI (Artificial Intelligence) computer functions might alter the role of designers working within some strands of crafts and design during the next decade.

I will first refer to an ancient artefact, and to a longstanding traditional craft in Japan to assess what the role of their crafters would have been, following this enquiry through advances in design made during the industrial revolution, and on into more recent times. I will also look at the writing of influential design thinkers such as Donald Norman and Victor Papanek to help analyse the position of designers, makers and crafters in society. In conclusion, I will show that the crafter's role remains largely the same, despite the rapidly accelerating rate of change in the material world, and that it will remain basically unchanged even in the face of huge commercial pressures and the advancing functions of AI. However, certain new environmental considerations have surfaced in recent decades, and the craftsperson must take account of these issues as they practice their craft.

As Donald A. Norman writes in *The Design of Everyday Things*,

... a new species is arising, artificial devices that have many of the capabilities of animals and people, sometimes super abilities... People are changing, machines are changing. This also means cultures are changing. (Norman, 2013 pp.284-285).

This gives the craftsperson alternative ways of working, which may include working with innovative materials or saving time on the working process, potentially leading to increased productivity and automated approaches to problem-solving. This can also affect the thinking of the craftsperson and how they adapt to using resources.

AI technologies, accessed via computers that we all use, are increasingly considered vital tools in a large range of industries and activities. AI can replicate and extrapolate from human learning, so it can look at huge amounts of data rapidly, give new insights into considerations like user-experience, solve problems more efficiently than the human brain. Then progress to making recommendations and supporting decision making. AI can not only support creativity, but in some respects can actively generate ideas from within its own resources. Some have feared that this will result in the end of human development and that AI will eventually entirely replace human creativity, therefore removing the role of the craftsperson. (Stryker & Kavlakoglu, 2024).

However, ultimately, the attraction of an individually handcrafted item to the buyer or user is exactly that it is handmade. That it has taken an individual care and time to produce, has originality and tells the story of what inspired the maker. The role of the craftsperson, even when using AI as a supporting tool, still remains unchanged, and will continue to bring a unique touch to design and crafting in the future. (Holly & Co, 2024).

The human race has reached a point in our evolution where we no longer need to evolve to survive on our own, yet we continue to develop our technology to attain a more comfortable life, even going as far as to have everything automated for us, and working side by side with Artificial Intelligence for the future advancement of both our biological and cognitive abilities. (Norman, 2013 p.284).

To examine the historic role of the craftsperson over three thousand years ago, we can analyse the craft and purpose assigned to one of the best-known ancient artefacts, King Tutankhamun's Funerary Mask, as listed in "The 6 Most Iconic Artefacts from the Ancient World". (Alex, 2022).

King Tutankhamun's Funerary Mask was intended for the young pharaoh's burial following his death. The mask was made from solid gold, depicting a pharaoh wearing a headdress with inlaid stripes of precious stone, and on the forehead were a cobra and a vulture, symbolising his rule of unified Upper and Lower Egypt. (Lucchesi, 2022). Funerary masks were supposed to guide the spirit of the dead back to its final resting place within the body. Most masks were made from cloth covered with stucco or plaster and then

painted. If the deceased was an important figure, then silver or gold were used for the masks. (Wingers, 2024). The use of such fine materials in Tutankhamun's mask serves as a sign of status and hierarchy in ancient Egypt, the valuable materials used retaining their monetary and perceived value to this day.

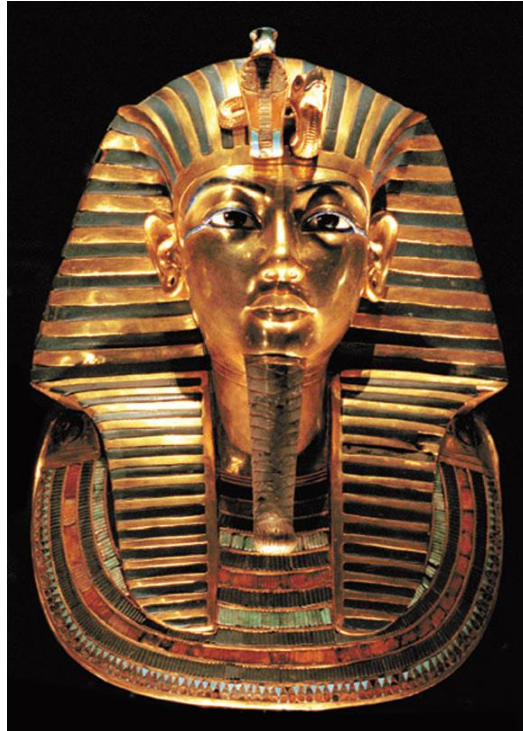


Fig. 1: *Mask*

The craftspersons who made these masks understood the different materials and what they symbolised, recognising their cultural and social relevance in 14th Century BC Egypt. The role of these crafters was to follow a clearly defined traditional format, not to innovate in terms of form or purpose. They brought their own fine craftsmanship to the process, the exact choice and combination of materials. This aspect of the craftsperson's role has not altered throughout history.

It is also interesting to consider the fact that throughout history we have many beautiful artefacts like Tutankhamun's mask in museums, galleries and in private collections worldwide, which were made by un-named, unknown crafters. Their works are universally recognised, but the makers remain anonymous.

Grayson Perry celebrates these forgotten men and women in his piece *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. This is a sculpted cast-iron ship covered with replicas of hundreds of items from the British Museum collection, where the artwork was displayed originally (2020 – 2021). “The tomb is a memorial to all the anonymous craftsmen of history.” (Miro, 2020).

The exhibit was displayed next to the Nereid monument, a tomb built to celebrate the life and afterlife of a ruler of Lycia around 300BC. Research into stylistic differences has shown that the sculptures on the monument were carved by different artists, all of whose names are now also lost to history. The role of these unknown crafters, however, was the same as that of named and celebrated makers through history and today – to ensure that the object made fulfilled its function, answered a brief and had the best design visually. (The British Museum, 2024).

Turning now to look at the history of calligraphy brushes from Japan; hand-made brushes have been around since the Edo period dating from 1603-1868. (Kovack, 2019). Yoshiyuki Hata is a third-generation brush maker and carries on the traditions of hand crafting calligraphy brushes in the modern day. The level of craftsmanship is clear from the great care and fine work involved in making each brush. A range of different animal hair is used, such as rabbit or goat, allowing for a variety of sizes, lustre and elasticity in each brush. This goes on to affect how the calligrapher uses the brush and influences which brushes they prefer. The hair, dimensions and any imperfections found are all spotted by Yoshiyuki Hata’s eyes, hands and instincts, all this being done without the aid of any modern-day technology.



Fig. 2: *Brush*

They use other simple materials such as an adhesive made from seaweed called Funori, and a handheld heated iron to seal the ends. Each brush handle is also handmade and customised to fit the brush. (Business Insider, 2021). This type of craftsmanship takes many years to learn, showing the brushmaker's dedication to the craft. This craft produces more humble objects than a king's gold funeral mask, but the craftsman of the calligraphy brushes is just as specialist in his own area and knows precisely how to create the finished product that is exactly what the user needs.

Scrolling on through time from these objects to the late 18th Century, in “Top 10 Inventions of the Industrial Revolution” we will look at The Gas Street Lighting in 1807. (Cartwright, 2023).



Fig. 3: *Gas light*

The first public street to be lit with gas was in Pall Mall, London, in January 1807, devised by inventor Frederick Winsor. This street lighting quickly became popular and within a few years, some 60,000 gas lamps were used in London. (London Remembers, 2024). Components of the lamps included air-tight tubes of tinned iron and soldered joints. The fuel source would come from two carbonizing iron furnaces using common pit or sea coal as fuel. The first light was from a thin stream of gas delivered by a small pipe, resulting in a very powerful flame which would burn brightly even in the open air with no cover. The inflammable gas would flow into the pipes just after 8:00pm and a lamp-lighter with a small wax taper would light the individual lamps one by one. (William Sugg & Co, 2020).

Today in 21st Century London, there are nearly 1,600 of these gas lamps remaining, kept on landmarks such as Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey. (London Remembers, 2024). Winsor, the original craftsperson of this lighting system, recognised the problems caused by the dark city streets, which led to night-time crime and many other issues, and he worked to find a technical solution, while at the same time designing the lamps themselves in such a way that they are still today considered an important part of the architecture of historic London.

In a sense Winsor, like many innovators during the Industrial Revolution, was more of an engineering designer than a craftsperson. However, the historian philosopher Richard Sennett, in his book *The Craftsman*, does not see this distinction as highly significant. He describes craftsmanship as “an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake” (Sennett, 2008). He also argues that “all skills, even the most abstract, begin as bodily practices; second, that technical understanding develops through the powers of imagination”. (Sennett, 2008). The skills and practice of both craftsperson and technical designer stem from the same impulses and develop via the act of imagining what can be made to fit a purpose.

The world was changing more rapidly during the industrial revolution than almost at any other time in history, the main objective being to make more of every product, more quickly, to generate wealth by creating need and demand. The inventions discussed above were not designed primarily to be objects of beauty, but to function efficiently and fulfil a specific purpose.

Form and matter are brought together in the act of creating, but this hylomorphic model became increasingly unbalanced in Western thought. (Ingold, 2009). In the mid-1800s, in a reaction to this unbalanced relationship between form and matter brought on by the mass production and functionality of the Industrial Revolution various thinkers, designers and crafters mainly in Britain, started an approach called the Arts and Crafts Movement, which they used in the design and manufacture of everything from buildings to jewellery. One of whom was William Morris who: “...believed passionately in the importance of creating beautiful, well-made objects that could be used in everyday life...” (V&A, 2024).

This shows that despite commerce and the need for quantity dictating how everyday objects were designed, in the 19th Century there was a return to appreciating values like the fine quality of materials and decorating these objects to make them as pleasing to look at as possible. “The ultimate job of design is to transform man’s environment and tools and, by extension, man himself.” (Papanek, 1971, P.28). In the Arts and Crafts movement, a central tenet was the enjoyment experienced by the makers during the process of creating, and the connection between the craftspersons and the end-users, all of which, according to the Movement, contributed to a better quality of life for all concerned. This principle remains true of the role of craftspersons in the 21st Century.

Following on from this period of rapid change in the development of design during the industrial revolution and its aftermath, the role of the craftsperson continued to evolve along the lines of three main strands. The first concentrated on the functional, everyday items that became crucial possessions allowing families to live and work, to cook, keep clean, warm and comfortable enough. For many of these items, the main factors were cost alongside functionality.

On the opposite end of this spectrum, the artisan craftsperson, often working alone and on a tiny scale of production, was producing items that were primarily objects of beauty even if they had a function in the first place. They had decorative values and would bring pleasure to the user or viewer from the quality of materials and workmanship.

During the middle of the 20th Century, a third strand started where a new generation of designers recognised that production costs should be kept low enough for the cost of objects to be accessible to working families, but that this would not mean that function replaced appearance and quality.

The 1960s saw designers such as Terence Conran working in the UK on interior design and on objects to use and enjoy throughout the home. Conran opened his first Habitat shop in 1964, bringing “the principles of good design, high quality and easy shopping into high streets around the globe.” (Conran, 1985). The role of these crafters and designers, though supporting the mass production of items, still reflects the crafter’s desire to

make unique marks in terms of aesthetic values and designed functionality.

In examining key artifacts and objects through the history of design and crafting, I have shown that the basic role of the craftsperson has not changed through time. The core role of the craftsperson remains as it always has been, to combine the best possible aesthetic qualities of an object with the most efficient function; to make sure to address the needs of the user, to be human-centred in concept. The writing of D. Norman supports these statements.

Norman outlines six fundamental principles of design all based on what the user is going to need from the object: Discoverability, Feedback, Conceptual Model, Affordances, Signifiers, Mappings. All of these stress how crucial it is for the craftsperson to keep in mind the experience of the user in interacting with the object, to make sure that whatever is designed centres around the needs of the human. (Norman, 2013, p.72).

As Norman argues: “Good design starts with an understanding of psychology and technology. Good design requires good communication, especially from machine to person, indicating what actions are possible, what is happening, and what is about to happen.” (Norman, 2013, p.8).

However, looking at the opinion of V. Papanek, we see that the very real prospects of climate change, the damage caused to our environment by over-consumption and conspicuous waste must now in the 21st Century, during the next 10 years and on into the future be considered carefully by every craftsperson in every aspect of their craft and work. (Papanek, 1971, p.346).

In conclusion, the role of the craftsperson in this evolving world of everyday design had become far more sophisticated than our early makers working on those ancient artifacts. Those makers only had access to a limited choice of materials, so did not have to go through a long research and design process before arriving at the final method, and they were often following ancient traditions and designs handed down through generations. However, those early crafters were working to a brief, a requirement, an impulse to signify something through their creations, and this aspect of the work of a craftsperson remains at least generally unchanged.

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