

Question 2:

**Define skill in the context of your own practice and the work of two
artists/makers/designers from the lecture series.**

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This essay will look at the definition of skill, particularly through the lens of crafts. In this case, the word “crafts” will take on a broad meaning of making hand-made objects. Looking at the works of Andreas Salvatori, and Ruth Duckworth, along with various theorists, this essay aims to define skill, both historically and in a modern sense. This will be done by addressing the meaning of “skill” in relation to the use of technology and the criticisms that modern art gets when the use of technological tools is involved, as well as the evolution of the meaning of skill and the ways that humans implemented skill.

Corbett defined “craft” in two main ways: as a verb (using skill to make an object typically by hand), and as noun (an activity that requires skill to make something by hand) (Corbett, 2019). Including “by hand” in those definitions suggests that having skill in crafts needs the involvement of hand-made processes. This is where the lines can get blurry. As we delve deeper into the age of technology, more and more of it seeps into the world of art and craft. We can see this through the exceedingly popular use of CAD and CAM, 3D printers and digital art platforms (Zenkevicius, 2019) . This begs the question as to whether the makers that use these new techniques are actually “skillful”, and as part of their process doesn’t require the use of hands and at which point is their art no longer theirs?

The first creative skills humans developed were those to help us make survival tools, such as axes and spears (Burke & Ornstein, 1997). Not only did this require extreme precision (knowing where exactly to strike the stone to shape it into a tool), but also the knowledge and creativity to come up shapes that performed the intended purpose. It can therefore be argued that humans were meant to create. In fact, it is that creativity and skill that pushed humans to evolve to the way we are today (Worrall, 2021). Looking at the evolution of our species, from how our hands uniquely evolved, to how making and creating has been proven to be mentally stimulating and beneficial for humans, it is hard to argue against the idea that humans were made to create.

This is further proven when comparing our hands to those of other ape animals like chimpanzees or orangutans, where we can see that our hands evolved for a different purpose. Not only could we gather food without hands, but we could also use the extreme precision we gained to hold tools in specific ways that made it easier to not only use them, but also make new and better tools (Balter, 2015). The great amount of various grips that our hands are capable of made it perfect for creating.

This plays perfectly into Sennet's idea that craft knowledge is gained in the hand and the only way that can happen is through tactile means (Sennett, 2008). It cannot solely be learnt from watching another craftsman at work, or verbally talking about the techniques used. In order for the craftsman to have full understanding and knowledge of what they're doing, they need to have physical experience of the processes. This suggests that skill and knowledge cannot exist without one another when craft is involved. In the words of David Pye, "skill is knowledge" (Pye, 1995, p.52).

In order for humans to develop creative skill in the first place, there has to be an innate reason as to why humans create. The study on natural reward signals done at Drexel University points to the fact that humans evolved to get pleasure from being creative, which can be directly linked to skill development in that area (Oh et al., 2020). This is where our psychology comes into play. It has been shown many times that craft and making are beneficial to our mental health. Not only can it help manage anxiety and depression, but research suggests that it can even help dementia (*4 reasons craft is good for your mental health*, 2020). Not to mention that craft is amazing at building communities and socialising, which is essential for humans. This was perfectly demonstrated during the rise of COVID-19, where there was a huge rise in people taking up creative hobbies while in lockdown (Wood, 2020). Peter Korn stated that when our

level of skill is high enough that we can trust our hands and our process, it creates a fulfilment for us, pointing to the idea that skill not only has a physical application, but also a mental one (Korn, 2015).

In many ways, skill can be seen as the mastery of your own craft. This can be seen in the case of Giotto's O, in which drawing the perfect circle free-hand was used by Giotto as a way to demonstrate the technical skills he developed throughout his time as a painter and architect. It can be argued that every craft has its own version of Giotto's O. A skill that looks easy but in fact took years to master. It is that imagined simplicity of the task that Peter Korn was referring to when he talked about the craftsman's skill being like a "well-tuned instrument" (Korn, 2015, p.46). It implies that true skill is gained when the craftsman's hands and knowledge in their craft are completely in sync and there is no question in one's ability.

Using Giotto's O, Pye presented an example consisting of two circles (one perfectly round, and the other with loosely fitted joints). Pye points out that the first circle will always look like good workmanship (Pye, 1995). This suggests that there is some form of universal agreement over what the good level of skill is. This is most likely a cultural thing, in which the art that we are surrounded by, influences how we view new art. This can be seen a lot in contemporary art and craft, where it gets lots of criticism when being compared to more traditional art that's been held in high regard and more valuable in western societies (Trekell Art Supplies, 2022).

This idea that some art is more valuable or better is known as "high art" (Robinson, 2020). This idea implies that there is a certain way that art should look or be made and it plays into Adamson's theory that skill is a way of achieving cultural authority (Adamson, 2018), and it's these authoritative ideas of what the "right" thing is that are solely constructed by society. It is culture's ideas that, therefore, dictate the proper use for tools and techniques, which in turn

provides certain skills which are then deemed as better than others. With this theory, it is clear that the concept of skill is dependent on one's own environment and norms within the craft.



Figure 1: Ruth Duckworth - Bowl Form

The first designer/maker that this essay will discuss is Ruth Duckworth. While making her porcelain and stoneware ceramic sculptures, she mostly used traditional hand-built techniques (Whiting, n.d.). Duckworth's ceramic work is often inspired by organic forms, as seen in Figure 1 showing her Bowl Form sculpture. Her techniques have been a major influence on hand-built ceramics in the following decades. This tactile aspect of her work, along with the organic shapes, come from her interest in the qualities of clay, making her push those boundaries of her material and using what's around her to achieve the desired effect. This plays well into the theory of skill that was proposed by Ingold, suggesting that skill is directly related to how the maker is present within their surroundings (Ingold, 2013). It only makes sense for people (especially designer-makers) to take inspiration from what's around them, whether that's the techniques they witnessed, or the style that they were surrounded by a lot.

Even with artists such as Duckworth, Flusser still claims that humans are becoming less natural and more artificial (Flusser, 2012) with technology becoming more popular. This suggests that we are starting to be more dependent on technology as we enter this new era, while also pointing to the idea that art and craft isn't "natural anymore".

This idea that craft is threatened by machines has also been explored by Richard Sennett. He argued that using machines in the art process removed the head from the hands, which in turn hurt the head. This suggests that the lack of the hand-made element in the art making process diminishes the creative and imaginative flow. Especially since he argued that part of skill comes from the imagination after the development of technical skills and technical understanding (Sennett, 2008). Flusser further expands on the idea that technology can be threatening by stating that machines are designed to deceive (Flusser, 2012). This can be interpreted for the world of craft too, as using a piece of technology to aid in the making process can deceive the viewer into thinking that the maker's skills are at a higher level than they are. When defining German words for "artist" and "artificial", and the English "cunning", he explained that these Germanic words come from the same root: Können (meaning "to be able to") (Flusser, 2012, p.18). This is quite an interesting overlap of these words, and in the context of craft it can be related to the idea that artificial art (digital art or art made using technology), is deceitful.

In the book "3D Technology in Fine Art and Craft", Mongeon delves further into the theory that technology impacts skill. She claims that the maker/artist doesn't need to use their skill in order to make art or to craft if they use machines (Mongeon, 2017) . This implies that in craft, skill is something that's achieved by the hands, as many of the processes involving creativity and making are partially lost to the technology.

The claim that using technological tools, such as 3D printers or digital drawing platforms, makes something not “handmade” and therefore not “skillful”, can also be applied to the use of traditional tools. If we use tools like different brushes to create different effects and textures, or using a saw to cut through metal, can we really claim that something is truly “handmade”? Of course this line of thinking is a little extreme, as our hands can’t physically do everything. In reality, the use of machines and digital processes, is only utilising a different set of tools in the process of crafting.



Figure 2: Andrea Salvatori - Ikebana Rock'n'Roll

The second designer that this essay will explore proves Mongeon’s idea wrong. Adrea Salvatori, also a ceramic artist, uses a very different process to Duckworth. For his collection titled “Ikebana Rock’n’Roll”, Salvatori used a ceramic 3D printer as part of his process. He did, however, tamper with the process by inserting spheres into the vessel and altering its shape.

WASP, the company that provided the 3D printer said that the “ikebanas represent the “concrete territory in which 3D printing and ceramic art coexist synergistically.”” (Vialva, 2019). Salvatori perfectly encompasses the balance between maker and machine. Not only does he utilise the 3D printer in a unique way by distorting the print as it’s being made, he also inserts handmade elements into his vessels. By doing this, he keeps the whimsical and creative part of his process and the end result, while also showing how useful modern and technological tools can be. Not to mention, understanding how to program a 3D printer, and how to design a file that works also takes a certain amount of skill through practice and trial and error.

There has been a lot of backlash about technology within the art world. Many criticise digital art, saying it’s lazy and the easy way to make art (Digital vs traditional 2021). These claims are usually made without much thought as to the processes behind these new digital techniques. Mastering digital skills can take just as much time and effort as mastering traditional techniques.

Even when looking at the idea that the machine takes away from the skill that’s required in handmade work, David Pye suggests that terms such as “handmade” are social terms, rather than technical ones. He pointed this out in reference to the use of machines within craft (Pye, 1995). This suggests that what we understand to be “handmade” is constructed by the environment around us. Especially with the age of technology being everywhere, and new tools being invented, the definition of what we view as “handmade” has to change too, just like when we define how skill fits into all of this.

To conclude, When we develop skill, we learn to trust our own hands, and trust that we know exactly how to bring our vision of the finished product to life. That trust in one’s own ability,

created a fully aware and calm maker that knows exactly what each step of the making process does, working with their hands and mind as a well-oiled machine (Korn, 2015). In this case, we can define “skill” as confidence in your own ability. With this level of confidence comes knowledge.

We can see that since the evolution of creations and crafts made by humans, the term “skill” has also evolved over time. For hunter-gatherers that term meant to be sufficient at making survival tools, now (with the application of new tools and technology), it is the combination of creative thought, technical knowledge, and the ability to apply new techniques to old ones. With that, as we enter new eras of making, what we know as “skill”, could change completely. In the case of skill, the meaning would change by broadening, in which the current meaning of the word is more inclusive than the previous meaning (Nordquist, 2018). It is a fluid word with fluid meaning.

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Figures

Figure.1: Ruth Duckworth: Bowl Form. Accessed
<https://www.artnet.com/artists/ruth-duckworth/2>

Figure. 2: Andrea Salvatori: Ikebana Rock'n'Roll. Accessed:
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/andrea-salvatori-composizione-40100-number-10-preludio-e-fuga>