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Define skill in the context of your practice and the work of two designers.

This essay will define skill in the context of design. In order to do this the writing of John Ruskin and Richard Sennett will be examined. Ruskin wrote an extended essay titled *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) in which he set out his principles for good architecture. Whilst Sennett in *The Craftsman* (2008) discusses what it takes to create something with skill. The work of artists Isamu Noguchi and Olafur Eliasson will be discussed. They are very different artists in terms of what they produce and the tools they use to create their work. American- Japanese Noguchi is inspired by traditional Japanese art and culture. Icelandic-Danish artist Eliasson is known for his large-scale installations that engage peoples' senses in how they interact with his pieces. By looking at these two artists the essay will discuss the skills, tools and techniques used in the creation of these art works.

Our hands have always been essential as tools used to create everything that was needed, from drawings on cave walls, to arrow heads, to hunting for food. The concept of 'handcrafted' comes from the mid 19th century, designers such as William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement rejected mechanisation, focusing on the hand of the maker and creating work accessible for all. Morris stated "... I do not want art for a few; any more than education for a

few; or freedom for a few..." (Npg.org.uk, 2024). He believed that art should not be held up high on a pedestal where no one, only the rich could enjoy. It should be available to fill our homes and be enjoyed by everyone.

However, hands do not work alone. Hands and tools work together. Ruskin believes there were a few parts of the body that went into making art. He stated, "Fine art is that in which the hand, the head, and the heart of man go together" (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2018). Ruskin states that the hand, head and heart need to be at one with each other. The tool is an extension of the hand as you cannot make art without a tool being held in your hand. This shows that and tools has been employed by many people over many decades. The use of tools is included in the term handmade, so with today's technology a computer is a tool with the data being in put by the designer. You cannot make anything solely with your hands, some tool element has to be included, whether it is a paint brush, a kiln or a carving tool. Hand crafted will always be a highly valued skill in terms of time and production methods. There can be an aura (Tate, 2017) about something made by hand unlike a replica. Skill is defined as "the knowledge and ability that enables you to do something well" (Collins,2024). The essay will firstly examine Ruskin and Sennett's writings and will then investigate the work of Noguchi and Eliasson.

John Ruskin wrote a book called the Seven Lamps of Architecture in 1849. Ruskin used seven lamps as a metaphor for the principles of architecture. The lamps were sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory and obedience. The Seven Lamps is almost biblical as it tells us what we should be doing in order to achieve good design. Ruskin uses the metaphor of a lamp as the light is guiding you through your own work but with the support and guidance of these basic

principles that you can fall back on. Each of the seven lamps names are all things you as a designer can control or steer yourself towards. They are of a deeper level than something like colour. Showing that Ruskin wants people to think about themselves and what they believe to be power, beauty and life. The skill is to be able to recognise these principles, use them and build off them. Do not fear them or disregard them, they are there as a foundation. To Ruskin beauty and power were needed to create a sublime building. Ruskin did not see the need for ornamentation and text on buildings unnecessarily. He objected to machines over the hand of the craftsman. Architecture needs to take inspiration from the natural world.

Richard Sennett in his book *The Craftsman* (2009) explores the idea of craftsmanship and the desire and the need to do a good job. Sennett states, “that everyone possesses the ability to do good work of some kind” and “that there is an intelligent craftsman in most of us” (Sennett, 2009, p.11). Good work is not measured on a graph or with a straight line. It comes in all forms, and in different forms for everyone. It can look different for each person even those that work in the same line of work. As long as the designer has put all their effort and passion into their work then it is good. In *The Craftsmen* Sennett discusses the use of machines, as the world got bigger and the demand for products increased. Designers and makers had to make a solution which ended up being loud, noisy and sometimes costly, machines that would make producing goods quicker. In some professions it has taken away a lot of artisans as a machine can do it quicker and that is all that consumers want. “The computer understands the answer, but I don’t think you understand the answer” (Sennett, 2009, p.156). To use a tool correctly you much know the answer. When using a hand tool, you much know how it works and what the result will be if you use it. Otherwise, your outcome will not be what you thought. It is the same for any digital tools. It would not work without your input, but you need to know what

your outcome will be, but also how the outcome has arrived there. Using a chisel, you need to know how to hold it, how to use it, how to make a precise cut and know if something does not look right, know what has caused it. This is the same for many tools hand or digital.



Fig 1 Isamu Noguchi (1952) Akari light sculpture

The Akari Light by Isamu Noguchi is based on traditional Japanese methods and culture. Akari translates as light in Japanese and is associated with illumination and weightlessness. There is a huge amount of traditional skill involved in making not only the paper but the light itself.

Noguchi stated,

Akari has its rationale in being in relation to people ... I was told early on that all a young couple needed in starting life together was a 'futon' and an Akari above—a pad and a light, that is, not only just light, but the Akari light which is a difference because it has a shape, a sense of being which is more than merely lighting a room, it is lighting

itself, that is, the paper of which the Akari is made becomes luminous as a result of the light inside, on its surface, however distant the light may be from the light bulb, it all becomes a luminous surface. (Kirsch, n.d.)

In 1951 Noguchi was inspired by witnessing a Japanese fishing festival which was illuminated with paper lanterns attached to the boats. These lanterns were mainly used for decorative or advertising purposes. The choice of lantern echoes the work of John Ruskin with his 'Seven Lamps' which were a metaphor for a guiding light for design. These handmade lanterns were called 'Chochin' were made from washi paper produced from mulberry bark. The tradition of making washi paper goes back one thousand years. Washi paper appealed to Noguchi because of its properties of strength and durability.



Fig 2 fibres used to make Washi paper (2024)

Washi is made using the *nagashi-zuki* handmade method, a plant mixture is added to pulp and passed over a bamboo frame creating longer fibres and therefore a stronger paper. The name Washi is translated as 'Japanese paper', this paper has been used for so many things

over the years including the first banknote. The paper's properties have been used for architecture, umbrellas and much more. Washi paper got its name when western paper was starting to be imported, and it made it easier for people to distinguish between Washi and western paper. Noguchi had noticed something that the makers of the lanterns did not utilise due to there being no need for it, this was to make the lanterns collapsible. This element was a part of the traditional Chochin but over the years the fabricators had chosen not to make them with this feature. For Noguchi this meant his Akari light could be a flat packed which would make it easier for shipping but also meant that the lantern aspect of the Akari would be more protected. This would also give the user more to assemble and create sense of pride in their Akari as they had to put it together.

Noguchi took great pride in his work, so much that once the Akari was in production he would watch over the construction of the hand-built light. He needed to know that each Akari would be just as well built as the last. Even though he had designed, tested and built the Akari there was still more to explore with the materials he had chosen. The Washi paper gave him the chance to experiment with traditional and irregular shapes as it has so much plasticity. He would also change the spacing of the ribbing which was exposed on the surface. The ribbing would give off a mysterious effect with shadows and light. Japanese tradition includes white lanterns which are associated with death and veneration. Lanterns are there to remember the one that have been lost, as they drift into the sky as a bright light. The light is seen as the person's energy. Noguchi added colour to some of his designs which took away the darker side of what a lantern means and brought this spirit of the lantern into a new lease of life. In many cultures there are a few different meanings to any one object and this differs between people as well.

Continuing with the theme of light the next artist to be discussed will be Olafur Eliasson's The Weather Project (2003) an installation in the turbine hall in the Tate Modern. The skill element is very different in this work as unlike Noguchi, it is very much a team effort using sophisticated technology.

The subject of the weather is a favourite in everyday conversations in the UK, everyone likes to comment and discuss the weather. It was inspired by an overheard conversation regarding the constantly changing weather following a snowstorm. Olafur Eliasson uses the subject of the weather to explore "ideas about experience, mediation and representation" (Tate, 2003). The artwork consisted of a sun rising in a misty sky, he recreated an encounter with nature inside a building. The installation comprised of a semi-circular screen, a mirrored covered ceiling, 25 meters in the air and artificial mist installed by a team of workers. Eliasson also created a questionnaire for the staff at the Tate, including questions on how the weather effects them personally. The skill in this project can be seen in how successful the project was experienced by over two million people, also the clever manipulation of materials to give a realistic impression of a rising sun in a misty sky in doors.



Fig 3 Olafur Eliasson (2003-2004) The Weather Project in the Turbine Hall, Tate Modern.

Viewers reactions to the installation were unexpected, some laid on the floor some protested when President Bush visited London by spelling out 'Bush go home' with their bodies, and

even the BBC news broadcasted the weather from the building. Whilst Eliasson does not work alone, his team includes experienced crafts people, technicians, designers, and architects. However, similar to Noguchi the project starts with an idea from Eliasson. “Olafur Eliasson has changed what it means to be an artist. His work straddles architecture, ecology, food, education, sustainability, climate change, perception and collective activity.” (Tate, 2019). From day one he has worked closely with scientist who have been able to make the “inviably visible” (Olafur Eliasson and Engberg-Pedersen, 2018) Eliasson works with teams of people who can model and create the known from the unknown. A lot of his work is creating large environments for viewers to walk into and experience for the first time. Behind this there is a team who has tried many different ways of making this feeling and connection to a specific environment.

To conclude this essay has explored the definition of skill in the context of design by looking at the work of Isamu Noguchi and Olafur Eliasson, as well as the writing of John Ruskin and Richard Sennett. Ruskin in his book *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) stated the principles of architecture were skills that needed to be included in a designer’s work. He believed that tools were an extension of the hand but also need the mind and the heart to create good work. Richard Sennett in his book *The Craftsman* (2009) discussed the term craftsmanship and believed that everyone is capable of creating good work if effort and passion are involved. Noguchi’s Akari lamp embodies a history of skill and traditional Japanese methods. Whilst Eliasson uses sophisticated technology and a team of highly skilled designers to recreate natural environments indoors.

To an extent the definition of skill is subjective and in the viewers hands to either appreciate the level of skill or not. However, a designer is aware of the amount of skill time and effort involved in each aspect of their work. A true designer uses tools that will help explore materials and techniques to better their understanding. Which in turn will help them be more creative and confident in what they do. There is also a learning process with new machine tools, even digital ones, as the people that use them have learnt through trial and error, just like someone uses a hand tool for the first time. Digital tools should not be feared or seen as the devil. The skill comes from the hand that touches it, the person not the thing. Designers and artists need to keep up with skills and tools in a fast paced and ever evolving world that will either leave you behind or help them evolve in their work.

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