

3MT PRESENTATION – 3:00

Once upon a time, there were ancient blacksmiths. In their origins in the 1500s, they discovered the process of forging and tempering iron ore to make simple tools, and occasionally, unintentionally, weapons and tools of steel. In the Medieval Period, blacksmithing was considered part of the SEVEN MECHANICAL ARTS and was a staple of every town, with a skilled blacksmith producing those tools and weapons and also household objects—think cauldrons and sewing needles—needed for essential everyday life. These medieval techniques carried through the mid-19th century, but their demand declined as machinery and mass production increased, in the Industrial Era.

Early in the 20th century, there was a brief but significant Golden Age for blacksmiths who were artisans, and made architectural ironwork, and much of the work from this time is preserved and admired. Unfortunately, the Great Depression and industrialization pushed the art to near extinction, as there was no need for blacksmiths, and blacksmithing as a trade or art was considered obsolete through much of the century.

Fortunately, in the 1970s, a resurgence of interest in the art occurred, and its popularity has grown and redeveloped into a unique community of artists who are specialized in their skill, advancing upon traditions and history and hoping to continue the trade into the future.

The same story—with slightly different character development—could be told of numerous other artisanal arts. Leatherworking. Bookbinding. Letterpress. Stained Glass. Glassblowing. Papermaking. Knitting, Weaving... to name a few. These are all arts that found their roots in function and necessity, evolved into mediums of artisanry and art, and—despite experiencing a contemporary resurgency in popularity as skilled art forms—run the risk of becoming... “LOST”.

My thesis research, titled “Lost or found: the evolution and preservation of artisanal arts”, endeavors to first trace the history and evolution of these arts to current day, and then to answer the all-important question: What is the VALUE of integrating traditional, artisanal arts in a contemporary visual arts education? To answer this, first we must find which arts are being taught, in what regions of the world, and in what kinds of institutions—public schools, higher education, trade schools, community centers, or just passed down through families? and WHY they are being taught—for necessity and function, for artistic expression, as innovative art techniques, or—to preserve and maintain cultural tradition. Additionally, there are the ramifications of contemporary culture and mass media, and their effects on these arts, to investigate—have skills and craftsmanship regressed to make way for creative expression? and is the easy availability of resources—such as tools and online instructional guides—helping to preserve the arts, or diminishing the quality of skill, thereby further necessitating a need for their inclusion in formal arts education?

Through my research, investigations, observations, and practice, I aim to solidly maintain the importance of artisanal arts education, thus helping to ensure that their stories may continue, and that these lost arts may forever be... found.