

Comprehensive Exam:
Artisanal Arts and Crafts Education Research

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The Relationship Between Craft Arts and Contemporary Art, and the Relevance of Crafts Education within Art and Design Education

There has long been a border, even a gulf, between the art and craft “worlds”, despite how tightly the two are, in reality, fundamentally and intrinsically bound. The fine arts “have always had a special relationship with handwork, with artisanal activity, and therefore, with craft” (Harrod, 2018, p. 15), but craft has frequently been marginalized in cultural discourse due to its technical attributes and dependence on tacit knowledge, its functionality evaluated as a negative connotation (Pöllänen, 2011). In the era of modern art in particular, craft has been incorrectly degraded in status and often conceived as a necessary “other” that, at worst, was a persistent affront to high aesthetics; and in the last century, even the traditionally fine-art act of painting has periodically been considered to disrupt conceptual schema and thus relegated to the category of craft (Adamson, 2007; Harrod, 2018). Adamson (2007), however, countered that “for all that craft is an embarrassment for the construct of modern art, it seems the modern art world cannot do without it” (p. 163), and that the history of modern craft may well end up mirroring that of modern art, as “a supplement to its narrative of progress and conceptual discovery” (p.14).

Indeed, craft has been intermittently recognized during the last half-century in the importance of that tacit and practical knowledge which it inherently embodies. Despite discourse categorizing utilitarian craftworks as non-art, or “not-quite-art”, those selfsame attributes of utilitarianism are the appeal for the use of craft media in conceptual subjects, and the definition of craft is currently broadening and branching further into the industrial and technological to include numerous types of making beyond the studio (Markowitz, 1994; Harrod, 2018). Craft is highly connected to contemporary art practice, as that practice is “brimming” with craft media

(Bryan-Wilson, 2013) and its processes “have become escapable in the contemporary art world” (Muszek, 2011, p. 67). In contrast to contemporary society’s revering of mass-production through machinery, conceptual contemporary artists are using handcrafted means—the methods and tools of craft—to recreate everyday objects in extraordinary ways, and in a manner of meticulousness that asserts the continuing value of craftsmanship (Steiner, 2012). Focillon (1992) wrote that “The artist, carving wood, hammering metal, kneading clay, chiseling a block of stone, keeps alive for us man’s own dim past something without which we could not exist. Is it not admirable to find living among us in the machine age this determined survivor of the ‘hand age’?” (as cited in Auping, 2008, p. 215).

Visual artists and designers give ceramics, knitting, glass blowing, woodcarving, embroidery and numerous other craft-based media the delegation of fine art in their inclusion, though contemporary clay still struggles to be taken seriously as a standalone process, being largely associated with art therapy or art education and devalued by its ubiquity (Perreault, 2018). Additionally, though these and other traditional, artisanal crafts are the “new” exploratory mediums chosen by contemporary artists over traditional art mediums such as paint, in art education, skill-based studies are not granted equal footing with those of conceptual problem-solving. Traditional skills like welding, stone carving, carpentry, and metalwork are taught, but usually in the distinction of manual-labor or technical skills without addition of conceptualization or philosophy, and supporting a class division between the art workers and art thinkers (Fineman, 2006). Adamson (2007), however, argued that craft itself can actually be considered a way of thinking, rather than simply using or making; and that defenders on either side of the fine art/craft divide should consider the contextual use of craft by contemporary artists to understand how craft is eligible for a conceptual thinking-about-making approach.

Distinctions between art and craft are often confused or even false, and crossovers occur as categories change, with “craftspeople becoming artists and artists becoming craftspeople” (Perreault, 2018). In their manifesto aptly titled *Gesamtkunsth Handwerk* (a German word describing an artwork compiling all the parts of the arts, particularly those handmade), Fritsch et al. (2011) questioned why there should be any distinctions between art and design and craft, especially as arts and crafts did not begin as separate entities, and propose instead an “art-craft-design” pluralism (p.179). Defining “craft” might now be as difficult as answering “what is art?” as the titles of designer, craftsman, and artisan continue to blur with the creative community of craft and its craftsmen/women diversifying even more widely (Tanner, 2010). Universities and art schools in the 1990’s offered an answer in the birth of “the designer-maker”, cross-breeding craft and design and creating “a new hybrid title that was as ambiguous and diverse as the work (it) created” (Tanner, 2010, p.10).

Some contemporary attitudes contrast and refute an amalgamation of art and craft/artist and craftsman, but in doing so, indirectly reinforce the value of their relationship. As set forth by Fineman (2006), artists have relied on apprentices, assistants and artisans for centuries, but in support and not entirely in place of the artist’s hand. Since the early twentieth century, however, with the factory-made objects d’art of DuChamp and Moholy-Nagy, artists are no longer “expected” to also be skilled artisans (Fineman, 2006). Contemporary artists such as Koons, Hirst, and Murakami commission others to fabricate their concepts in entirety, shifting the divide even further to where it’s “the artist’s idea and vision that are prized, rather than the ability to master the crafts that support the work” (Fineman, 2006, p.170), with artists increasingly acting more as philosophers than craftsmen—but with a need for artisanal artists who can execute the craft.

Craft education, therefore, becomes all the more vital for the contemporary art world, though often classified as a separate field in art schools. Craft as art was given validation early on in American art education. Benjamin Franklin, a pioneer in education, advocated for the inclusion of art in curriculum, but for its utilitarian value—“Art, in his view, was to be used as a tool for improving the skills of the professional and the quality of the crafts necessary for life” (Eisner, 1972, p. 29). The first arts departments and schools to be developed within universities included programs in clay, textiles and woodworking (Greeley, 1992) and the industrial uses of art were the justification for including art instruction in common school curriculum (Eisner, 1972). The German *Bauhaus* school, in turn, sought to close the divide between art and craft as a combined school and academy of art, craft, and design; its founder, Walter Gropius, famously stated: “Architects, painters, and sculptors, we must all turn to the crafts. ... There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman; the artist is a craftsman raised to a higher power” (Greeley, 1992, p. xxiii).

When craft was cut off from the vitality of Modernism, and thus essentially excluded in the search for the “new”, it embraced its marginalized state for a time and its focus narrowed to the refocusing of old techniques and sentimental aesthetics (Clark, 2009). After 1945, however, the American craft movement “entered a period of astounding growth and aesthetic brilliance” (Clark, 2009, p. 48) following the effects of a GI bill that allowed servicemen to resume their educations. Clark (2009) addressed the advancements and ramifications for craft and art education that resulted:

...with state help covering the costs — (it) made art education popular, and universities opened departments across the country to cater for this. Craft courses were seen as an easy ‘grade improver’, and spread rapidly. By 1975, nearly 300 institutions of higher

education were offering BFAs and MFAs in the crafts. But this was a two-edged sword. On one hand crafters, securely employed, could experiment, transforming craft dramatically, expanding boundaries and allowing it to engage in debates and borrow concepts from the fine arts. On the other hand it was bound ever-closer into academia (p.49).

Racz proposed that contemporary craft practice is “at a pivotal point, where makers are free from constraints of utility and can use its roots to conceptualize ideas” (Racz, 2009, p. 136). Craft’s identification as traditional or old-fashioned, sometimes in the derogatory, should rather be viewed as its strength, and perhaps its most important attribute and contribution to contemporary art. Current-day artists/designers/crafters combine traditional aesthetics and practices with contemporary attitudes, intertwining handwork with technology and design, seeking after representation of traditional values and supporting original ideas with original forms (Tanner, 2010). Graduates of craft-skilled courses in both secondary and higher education are creating outcomes which are blurring the lines of craft, design, and art, and artists with backgrounds in crafts are finding new ways of expression utilizing traditional materials and techniques (Pöllänen, 2011; Tanner, 2010) even as “the idea of craft continues to evolve, simultaneously, away from and back to craft traditions” (Buszek, 2011, p. 73).

Teachers of craft-based curricula are seeing the future of craft in their students’ work as it appears to be moving away from the margins and “toward the center of contemporary-art discourse” (Buszek, 2011), but there is still a divide, which conflict is ironically owed partially to art education. Though postmodern views continue to challenge hierarchal views of “high” and “low” art, Pöllänen (2011) suggested that within school systems, the separationist and technical aspect of craft education serves to create a divide as well as suppress personal expression. The

contemporary art movement of Afrofuturism supports craft in its use of its traditional and indigenous methods to retell the past in an illustration of the future, but also recognizes that, in most American art classrooms, craft has a disparaged position; in order for such cultural art-making methods to not be marginalized, “art curriculum cannot be led by Western ideals that continue to dichotomize ‘arts’ and ‘crafts’” (Acuff, 2020, p. 19). To truly merge art and craft, craft should be recognized and practiced as an independent mode of self-expression beyond the trappings of mere utilitarianism, and to do this, art education and craft education must be combined (Pöllänen, 2011).

The Value of Cross-Cultural Education Using Traditional or Heritage-Based Artisanal Arts and Crafts

“We are living in an age of complexity, where globalization and interdisciplinarity permeate the cultural condition” (Greenhalgh, 2002, as cited in Racz, 2009).

In many cultures, traditional, artisanal arts and crafts are an integral part of identity, and the preservation and communication of heritage within, or across, a culture or region may often be achieved by the continuation of their crafts. A cultural exchange took place between America and Japan during the 1950’s Cold War. Advocated by John D. Rockefeller III, and intending to produce mutual feelings of sympathy and appreciation for culture, the project included exhibitions of traditional Japanese crafts. Such exhibitions not only gave Americans the opportunity to appreciate the crafts, but their resulting outward expressions of appreciation for Japan’s pre-modern culture, in turn, fostered a transformation of Japan’s perception of tradition (Kida, 2012). What had hitherto been a reluctance on the part of craftspeople to participate in ‘traditional’ crafts, considering them old-fashioned, evolved alongside Japan’s desire to reunite its society to pre-war strength of community in the aftermath of defeat; that effort centered on the

word tradition, and craftspeople in turn experienced a renewed interest in the production of traditional crafts, as well as an identification of self as “carriers of traditional Japanese culture” (Kida, 2012, p. 393).

This example of cultural exchange serves to introduce the importance of protecting heritage through craft education. As an artisan is a craftsman skilled in a manual trade, and crafts are the medium of utilitarian art, then artisanal arts are the crafts of the artisan. According to Adamson (2010), craft can be defined as “an application of skill and material-based knowledge to relatively small-scale production” (p. 2), thereby allowing a wide range of cultural, artisanal activities to be included under the umbrella of craft, from all corners of the globe, and especially beyond the typical arts-and-crafts designations of Western pedagogy. Craft is almost always a triangulation between maker, material, and tool, which tool can even be the maker’s hand (Adamson, 2010). As it is also In early Medieval periods, almost all production of trades and personal goods was individualistic and completed by hand-labor alone (Morris, 2010). The Industrial Age replaced hand with machine individuality with mass-production, and many artisanal skills were diminished, but not lost; metalworkers, for example, were still needed to craft and fashion the machines that had replaced their trade, and the modern industrial artisan was born alongside a shift from artisan-as-tradesman, to artisan-as-artist (Adamson, 2010). There are other reasons for the temporary disappearance of heritage craft, for not every culture was affected outright by the advent of machine. The colonization of the Hawaiian islands in the mid-1800s, for example, introduced cotton fabric alongside Christian standards of modesty, and the traditional kapa barkcloth of Hawaiian culture was virtually extinct by 1890 (Francis, 1997). Those handmade goods that survived the 20th century are rapidly disappearing “from even the most backward of civilized countries” today, however (Morris, 2010, p.147), and there is a

general regret for their absence as well as their individualistic nature. Craft is persistent, however, and modern craft is wide-ranging and thriving, occupying multiple constructs to serve multiple purposes within modern economies (Adamson, 2010), including a revitalization of the traditions and skills associated with its artisanal roots.

Education and awareness is key in the preservation of cultural artisanal arts, and is brought about through apprenticeship, informal transfer of familial knowledge, and formal pedagogy. There are numerous examples of countries who now recognize and emphasize the importance and effectiveness of maintaining their own national, cultural heritage through regional craft inclusion in art curricula. In Hawaii, where state and cultural organizations have proclaimed their commitment to the regeneration of the kapa craft, workshops are taught in school as part of the Hawaiian studies program (Francis, 1997). Art educators in Kuwait proposed a plan to change the national art curriculum to be a balance of traditional, indigenous arts and values with current theory and practice (Anderson & Al-Muhanna, 1994). And education-based research in Finland shows that engaging with traditional crafts promotes a strong connection to culture as well as space for self-expression, making the case for connecting craft and cultural within a broader conceptualization of art education (Kokko & Dillon, 2016).

While the greatest implication of retaining national heritage lies in the education of the traditional crafts in the region from whence it originates, there is additional value in cross-cultural exposure. International borders may be figuratively crossed in a dual partnership of exchange, as in the Japan-USA cultural exchange project of the Cold War; literally reached via an immersive apprenticeship in the native region of the craft; or experienced through multicultural art and awareness within the art classroom.

By engaging in art projects with an emphasis on the craft media of a region, students can be introduced to the concept of cultural continuity, as well as change, that already occur cross-culturally (Spruill-Fleming, 1990). The African/African-American aesthetic and artistic continuity, for one, can be appreciated through the use of cultural-specific artisanal craft media such as carving, metalworking, jewelry, clay modeling, instrument building, and even quilting. Beyond perpetuation and preservation of craft tradition, however, are the society-conscious considerations that are created as societal and historical connections are revealed. African metalsmithing, for example, has a long and widespread tradition throughout the continent, and the skills that the slave artisans brought to America are revealed in the ironwork craft of the South (Spruill-Fleming, 1990). Furthermore, many African crafts, including iron-working, that would be labeled as utilitarian by Western society, held additional importance in community with roles of religious significance (Hâmpaté Bâ, 2010).

A final example of valuable methods for cross-cultural engagement is seen in Shafer's study of art education in Egypt (2013), wherein students were primarily introduced to Western philosophies and practices over those of African continent, and Egypt in particular. Shafer found that when students engaged in certain Western methods, the "conceptual complexities intensified" (p. 46) and the exposure provided supplemental grounds for creative expression as students were able to thrive in artistic traditions that were not their own (Shafer, 2013). Thus, the study of heritage as exemplified by craft offers multiple avenues of cultural appreciation, and delving into practices of common ancestry or cross-cultural application can create artworks that serve as visual bridges of understanding (Spruill-Fleming, 1990).

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