

Escapism Through Crafts: The Underlying Benefits of Returning to Handiwork

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Abstract

Following the Industrial Revolution, technological advancements have gradually supported the mass production of goods. Despite this direction, the over-saturation of products has unintentionally caused an opposing, creative movement. Artists are seeking to return to preindustrial times by embracing traditional craftsmanship practices in order to create handmade goods. Although negatively seen as a form of escapism, the reasons for this act of retreating has provided insight into the value of crafts, including the social and cognitive benefits of working with one's hands.

Keywords: crafts, craftsmanship, escapism, human development

Introduction

The term “crafts” conjures a variety of associations, definitions, and even imagery of past experiences. Initial descriptions may include hobbies, leisurely activities, as well as Do-It-Yourself (DIY) and home improvement projects. Participation in these activities, particularly the latter two, have been perpetuated by television programs, such as HGTV, which features home and garden designs and renovations. Other sources of technology, such as online-based platforms, further encourage the creation of personal pieces of work without the aid of a professional constructor or artist (Ivey & Tepper, 2006; Pohl, 2011).

Forms of participating in the DIY movement have increased exponentially. Within the past decade, the rise of the DIY culture has transformed through technological advancements and the establishment of digital hosts. A couple examples include Instructables and Etsy – the online-based, selling platform for independent artists and creative enthusiasts. Through this website, artists can create a virtual shop to sell handmade goods and vintage items, creating an easily accessible consumer culture and a community of like-minded designers. According to Ivey and Tepper, this movement represents the undeniable growth of “amateur art making,” in which aspiring artists “acquire high-level skills at particular crafts, hobbies, sports, or art forms” (para. 8). These skills, as Ivey mentions, are indicators of those, who “are not professionals but are good enough to present their work publicly” and are willing to explore a possible second career in the arts (Ivey & Tepper, 2006, para. 8).

Although the advancements in technology have contributed to the popularization of this “craft” culture, the overwhelming inundation of mass production, and consequently the consumption of goods, even through such websites as Etsy, has undermined the value and

integrity of traditional craftsmanship. This current wave of technology parallels the history of industrialization, in which the role of handiwork was replaced by machinery, causing a detachment between the artists and resulting product (*Elbert Hubbard, 2013; Risatti, 2006*).

Through the progression of technology from the beginnings of industrialization, the in-depth knowledge and skills of these craft practices have been forgotten, creating a deep-seated longing for simpler times. Thus, artists are, once again, retreating back to the crafts in order to counteract the impersonal use of technology and the growing market of production. This return signals a desire for autonomy and individual self-expression through intimate interactions with the materials as well as the process of designing and creating a product. Additionally, the appreciation for and the return to crafts highlights the underlying benefits of handiwork, which calls attention to possible positive social and cognitive outcomes of craftsmanship practices (*Elbert Hubbard, 2013; Pohl, 2011*).

Definition of Crafts

As opposed to DIY, craftsmanship takes into consideration the conscious physical interaction of artists with materials and the process of constructing handmade goods. In addition, crafts incorporate and balance design with the functionality of the end product as a defining characteristic. According to Hanks (1979), craft means to ‘make or fashion with skill, especially by hand’ (Campbell, 2005). This skill, as discussed by Campell, does not only include the details of extensively understanding the process of creating a product but also a thorough knowledge of the qualities of materials, which affect this same process (p. 27; Risatti, 2006).

However, the skills involved in craftsmanship are not purely implemented without machinery, as the phrase “handmade (or handcrafted) goods” may suggest. Instead, as mentioned

by Campbell, craftsmanship, as opposed to the industrial, mass production of goods, is “a production system in which the worker is in control of the machine [rather than] the machine is in control of the worker” (p. 28). Through this system, the artist utilizes and operates necessary equipment and tools by hand, such that these pieces of machinery and the resulting product act as a bodily representation and physical extension of the artist, which contributes “an inherent, human sense of what is proper and fitting” (Risatti, 2006, p. 16).

Additionally, craft incorporates emotional and personal components into the practice and process of creating a product. As the tools behave as a continuation of the artist, the process becomes the vessel for the artist to imbue his or her own personality, self-expression, and identity (Campbell, 2005; Chattopadhyay, 1984; Peach, 2013; Risatti, 2006). Craftsmanship, thus, represents an absolute form of creation. The artist not only establishes agency over the design, process, and selection of materials but also the handmade skill is the reference and foundation of the end product (Campbell, 2005; Risatti, 2006).

Other than the close involvement of the hand, the design ethos of the artists is also a central piece to crafts and craftsmanship, which also separates these practices from DIY projects and the fine arts. According to Chattopadhyay (1984), the ideologies of design are not separate from the practicality of a handmade good, even to the extent of a product’s details. The “ornamentation and decoration are not divorced from utility” and the preservation of a simple design remains with the product (p. 8).

History of Crafts

Historically, craftsmanship revolved around the family and cultural traditions. These practices were passed through generations, in which transferring specific skills for making objects

and artifacts were embedded into everyday life through apprenticeships (Chattopadhyay, 1984). This form of education created a personal bond between two individuals, in which the experienced teacher informed the student of craftsmanship skills. This relationship, as Chattopadhyay emphasizes, represented a high regard and appreciation for the cultivation of a product. The interaction between the instructor and student is characterized by the humility of the instructor to encourage the practice beyond his or her own expertise and the apprentice's eagerness to carry on the tradition and acquire such skills (p. 10).

With the ever-growing utilization of machinery and technology, however, the importance of these apprenticeships has deteriorated. The function of education has turned away from handiwork and physically interacting with materials and toward a knowledge-based society. As Crawford (2009) mentions, educators focused on preparing students to become 'knowledge workers,' in which shop-class programs were replaced by sterile classroom environments, focused on the absorption of facts and information (para. 3). Consequently, the alteration of education has detracted from learning, in general, and the artist's agency and control, once associated with craftsmanship, has given way to machinery and the automation of mass production (Chattopadhyay, 1984; Crawford, 2009).

Crafts Movement, Revivals, and Escapism

In "What goes around comes around? Craft revival, the 1970s and today," Peach (2013) describes the response to industrialization as well as the contemporary ideology of crafts in Britain. During the 1970s, The Crafts Advisory Committee (CAC) was established as a state-funded organization. Its mission was to revitalize the crafts through the incorporation of fine arts ideologies such as conceptualism and dematerialization (p. 163). These principles abandoned the

value of craftsmanship, which were considered “a supplemental, less important, activity in the production of a work of art” and focused on the “ideas [of art] over making” (Peach, 2013, pp. 164-165).

However, the altered purpose of crafts, through the emphasis on these ideologies, caused an unexpected result – the appreciation of and the return to craftsmanship and the value of handiwork was promoted. Such outcomes originated from the sociological and economic factors of the 1970s, artists attempted to escape turmoil (Peach, 2013). During this time period, Britain was consumed with financial crises in addition to an environmental advocacy movement that arose from warfare and nuclear developments. Furthermore, a new feminist movement, which challenged the sphere of domesticity, altered the meaning of such crafts as knitting and sewing to a form of empowerment. Thus, this climate fostered an admiration for making that encouraged “creative autonomy and self-expression” (Peach, 2013, p. 168).

Application

According to Hutchinson (1951):

The field of Arts and Crafts represents one of the many outlets for human expression and serves as a form of release for the universally inherent desire to create. Arts and Crafts can be described as a process of communication rather than a list of activities. It is worthy of consideration in the same category as music, dance, drama, and other creative activities that help interpret the inner response to the full life (McMillan, 1961, p. 1).

As a part of craftsmanship, artists and art advocates describe the inherent joys of handiwork, including the sense of accomplishment and personal fulfillment (Hoffmann, D.

personal communication. November 4, 2013). Through the process of manipulating materials, in such environments as the Craft Center, participants experience the social implications of interacting with instructors and other students. Additionally, the manual work, involved in traditional craftsmanship practices, provide opportunities that facilitate cognitive development that are apart from forms of industrialization and mass production.

The Craft Center

The Craft Center is a prominent organization within the University of Oregon's the Erb Memorial Union. It provides opportunities for students, staff, and faculty members at the University of Oregon as well as the larger, Eugene community to participate in visual arts, educational programs and workshops. These opportunities specifically include unique crafts, such as ceramics, metalsmithing, glassblowing, and woodworking, which supplement the more traditional, fine art practices, such as drawing and painting, that are offered within the School of Architecture and Allied Arts (The Craft Center, n.d.).

The existence of the School of Architecture and Allied Arts supplies the student population at the University of Oregon with opportunities to earn a degree – whether undergraduate, minor, certificate, or graduate – in visual arts courses. Although broad in its scope, which now encompasses the branch of digital arts as well, the availability of these courses are limited to only students, who are pursuing these degrees (The School, 2011).

These academic establishments and affiliated fine art centers and galleries are not an uncommon feature of larger, higher educational institutions. However, such organizations like the Craft Center typically do not hold a presence on a university or college campus. The Craft Center, though, has arguably become the refuge for artists as well as university and community

members, who seek a place of solace and a retreat from the overwhelming amounts of technology and mass production. Through this return to traditional craft practices, participants, including the instructors, engage in opportunities that facilitate social interactions and cognitive development through general classes as well as leadership and teambuilding workshops.

Social Interactions Through Third Spaces

In “A Study of the Criteria Used in the Establishment of an Arts and Crafts Program in the College Union,” McMillan (1961) advocates for the existence of the Craft Center as an integral part of campus life at the University of Oregon. In particular, she applies pressure to develop such an organization by mentioning “the Union is responsible for providing a cultural and recreational program for the campus community” (p. 2). Throughout McMillan’s research, she explores the existence of arts and crafts programs in other university settings. However, her preliminary research does not indicate the breadth of establishing such as institution on campus, including such factors as space and location, which impact the viability of the Craft Center in comparison to other on-campus organizations.

In support of McMillan’s research and mission to bring arts and craft programs on campus, third spaces, such as the Craft Center, are important institutions within society. According to Oldenburg (1999) in “The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community,” a third space is “a powerful resource” and a place of solace to counter the stresses and frustrations that may arise from the constant responsibilities within other institutions, such as home, work, and school (p. 32). Additionally, as a third space, the Craft Center also offers a retreat from technological

advancements, which reflects the same sense of relief, in the form of offering traditional craftsmanship workshops.

When considering the Craft Center as a third space, the activity of creating an object and interacting with individuals, who are working in different studios, also provides an opportunity to develop interpersonal interactions, even between strangers and acquaintances. As Oldenburg (1999) describes, the absence of interaction and engagement with different groups of individuals, by introducing the activity of a "game," acts as a means to facilitate conversation between players and spectators (pp. 30-31). These interactions, coupled with the action of creating, establish an informal and unassuming atmosphere to engage in a "playful spirit" (p. 38). Furthermore, the social constructs of each workshop mirrors the apprenticeship practices of traditional craftsmanship, as introduced by Chattopadhyay, in which the instructor imparts skills-based knowledge upon the students. This form of education enhances interpersonal interactions by developing a relationship over the course of workshop sessions (p. 10).

Simply the action of creating, however, does not indicate an organization's level of success. Other variables, such as location and space, impact the viability and visibility of the organization to initiate these social interactions. In "Art spaces, public space, and the link to community development," Grodach (2009) describes various factors that contribute to the establishment of third spaces. In particular, Grodach highlights the importance of considering the location of a third space with the intention of attracting and engaging different audiences (pp. 483-484).

This concept is fundamental for developing an organization, including university organizations like the Craft Center. The location, according to Grodach, will determine the

efficiency of accessing the organization as well as the effectiveness of implementing programs and events as it relates to the economic, such as financial investments in on-campus retail, and social, such as connecting with other on-campus organizations, returns (pp. 483-484). Without the convenience of an organization's location – accessibility, accommodating to various forms of transportation, and near other avenues for engagement – the organization may fail to incorporate certain audience members, who are not located in the vicinity, such as individuals within the community of Eugene.

However, already situated within the Erb Memorial Union, the Craft Center addresses these issues in order to maximize the social impact of participating in crafts. As a part of the Student Union, the Craft Center receives a high amount of foot traffic, featuring studios and pieces of work through the glass windows and display cases, which attract members to participate. The placement and location, therefore, aids in increasing the participation in crafts.

Social and Cognitive Benefits

Through experimental research studies, investigators have uncovered the cognitive and social benefits of intensive participation in traditional, fine arts practices. Results from these research studies, involving visual and performance arts, indicate overall improvement in academic achievement, represented through higher standardized test scores as well as elevated grades in reading and subject-related courses (Catterall, 2009). Particularly, in “Learning in the Visual Arts and the Worldviews of Young Children,” participation in the arts also positively impacts social capacities as well as cognitive abilities (Catterall & Peppler, 2001). As mentioned by Catterall and Peppler, artistic exchanges and gallery exhibitions in visual arts programs strengthen relationships between students and school personnel as well as heighten levels of

motivation and self-efficacy. The previous literature thoroughly outlines these benefits of the visual and performance art programs, among other human developmental outcomes, which is implemented in the Craft Center.

The Craft Center not only facilitates social interactions, through the instructor-apprentice model, but also cognitive development. Through craft workshops, this center naturally encourages participants to work with their hands through the manipulation of such materials as glass, wood, and clay. Furthermore, specialty workshops that promote teambuilding and leadership support the benefits of crafts in advancing social development and prosocial behaviors.

Although the Craft Center, does not directly mention these leadership and teambuilding workshops on their website, a report from the Erb Memorial Design Team (2011) briefly describes these opportunities as a part of the Craft Center. These leadership and teambuilding workshops are suited for students at the University of Oregon as well as the community at large to understand and develop skills in management, supervision, and collaboration (p. 1).

In the video “BiG,” de Gerlache (2012) deconstructs the possible social benefits of leadership and teambuilding through crafts. Specifically, he focuses on a specific group of international glassblowing artists, led by Jeremy Wintrebert – an American artists, who describes his recent battle of cancer and recovery through glassblowing. In this video, there are connections between community, in the sense of fostering meaningful relationships, and crafts through the process of making a large, glassblowing piece. Throughout this video, de Gerlache uses cinematography to emphasize the importance leadership, especially with a group of individuals, who speak different languages, as well as the facilitation of group connections. He captures the

results of a stronger bond between the artists through the completion of the project (de Gerlache, 2012).

The overwhelming sense of satisfaction from glassblowing, as represented by de Gerlache, also supports the research completed by Catterall and Peppler, particularly the concept of self-efficacy. Wintrebret and another one of the glassblowing artists in the video – John “Jono” Luckas Jr. – describes the intense process of glassblowing, including the restrictions of working with the materials and equipment. He suggests that the process of making a glassblowing project, particularly a large piece, entails a balance between painstaking and peaceful operation. The resulting outcome is a sense of agency and control through the process of glassblowing (de Gerlache, 2012).

Implications and Limitations

Technological advancements, from the Industrial Revolution and onward, include the incorporation of machinery, which replaced the hand in the process of making, and digital expansion with the onset of the Internet. These developments have drastically impacted the way one engages, or more so disengages, with crafts. The separation of making from the process of design has caused the artist to retreat to preindustrial times, in which the hand played a larger role.

This return to meaningful interactions with materials has been supported through the Craft Center and the previous research studies that indicate the importance of working with one’s hands. These results help validate the meaning of crafts and the viability of these practices among other fine arts practices. However, the larger implications exist when participating in the traditional craftsmanship practices.

Participating in crafts provides opportunities to develop prosocial behaviors, such as leadership, teambuilding, and empathy. In addition, the process of intimately working with materials enhances cognitive capacities, including self-efficacy and control over the creative process as well as motivation to overcome obstacles. These same benefits support the hands-on component, according to Crawford, that seems to be lacking in education and fortifies the importance of incorporating handiwork in classroom settings.

Despite the positive implications of crafts, there are limitations of this research. As previously mentioned, the literature for uncovering the benefits of traditional fine art practices is prevalent. In comparison, however, the research presence and knowledge of other art forms, particularly crafts, is notably lacking. Although Catterall & Pepler (2007) do examine ceramics as a focus, the students learn basic skills of sculptural art rather than traditional techniques, including the process of wheel throwing. However, these types of research studies provide a model for conducting experimental studies for traditional craft practices, which should be implemented and further explored.

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