

# The crafts, between heritagisation and digitalization

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En la sociedad industrial, primero, y postmoderna, después, lo artesano es vivido como una dimensión marginal de la producción económica, digna de protección y preservación. Aquí se pretende abordar lo artesano como un régimen de acción en cierto sentido trans-histórico, que experimenta una metamorfosis significativa en múltiples direcciones en la era de la cybercultura, siendo una de estas direcciones justamente la derivada de la producción digital en la era de la tercera revolución industrial.

Nella società industriale, dapprima, e in quella postmoderna in seguito, l'artigianato è vissuto come una dimensione marginale della produzione economica, degna di protezione e preservazione. In questo scritto si intende proporre l'artigianato come un regime di azione in un certo senso trans-storico che sperimenta una metamorfosi significativa nell'era della cybercultura: proprio la produzione digitale è una delle direttrici di sviluppo artigianale nell'epoca della terza rivoluzione industriale.

## I. A doomed relic from the preindustrial past?<sup>1</sup>

It is often stated that modernity is anticrafts, not only in an ideological sense but also structurally and historically. The industrial production of standardized goods for mass consumption as well as the new organization of labour pushes handmade production, at a small scale, toward the periphery of the social-economical system even though these are based on trade union relationships and protection.

On the other hand, we postulate its persistence and claim its dignity both by the acknowledgment of its economic contribution to the GDP and because of its cultural significance.

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<sup>1</sup> Sennett, 2009: 361.

What is the truth about these diagnostics? What is understood by craft? Is there actually a timeless and transhistorical essence? What avatars does it experience in modernity and postmodernity? Will it survive in the age of digital culture? Hence we will defend that there is not only certain persistence but that there are also mutations and a multiplicity of phenomena that are claimed as craft. The present era has generated new and different crafts by means of sectorialization, heritagization and conspicuous consumption and digitalization.

A thesis like this presupposes a social-historical perspective: the transformation of prime materials into goods or items of use through manual production is a social fact which is linked to human evolution and has been maintained over-time (from the lithic industry to 3D guns). In some moment in time, those who manufactured housewares and hunting arms, concocted cloth and strings, made baskets and amphoras, became a differentiated social category just like traders.

The core of this mode of production in economy terms and its role in a stratificational structure of sociopolitical character is a different phenomenon altogether, which in the western world has its maximum fulfillment in medieval society and the old regime. With the industrial and digital revolutions we observe a displacement of handcraft productions and in a certain sense reinvention through hatching of new meanings and a plethora of craft modalities, which generate a new status for the craftsman.

## II. From mechanical trades to creative vindication

We shall begin by exploring the creation of a differentiated lexicon, both in national dictionaries and other texts. With the first we register the oldest entries; with the latter, the existence of a certain normalization.

The first dictionaries are published at the beginning of the XVII century. In the *Diccionario de Covarrubias* (1611) the entrance *artesano* does not exist as such, but under the word *artero*, we find a definition which tells us that within the *Reino of Valencia* mechanical officials were called craftsmen «who earn their living by using their hands»; in 1612, the *Vocabolario degli accademici della Crusca* is published; the entry *artigiano* remits us to *artifice* («l'uso dice anche artiere e artigiano»); and in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* of 1649, it is stated that *artisan* derives from the XVI century: originally it was written *artizan*; it was taken from the Italian word *artigiano*, *artesano* and denotes «celui qui exerce un art manual, un métier».

The making of modern etymological lexicon allows us to verify how *artigiano*, *artesano* and *artisan*, appear in the wide field determined by the Latin entry *ars* (*recta ratio rerum faciendum*) through processes of differentiation. In fact, the *Lessico Etimologico Italiano* illustrates the birth and evolution of terms such as *artista*, *artesano*, *artigiano*, and *artiere*. The latter which is defined as a person who works in a trade, appears in the XIII century; *artigiano* in the XIV century as synonymous of *artista* (who practices an art); in the XV century we also find *artesa*,

*artesan* and *artesano* to refer to an independent worker who carries out an activity *per lo piú artistica* in his own workshop. According to this book, the terms *artese* and *artigiano* inaugurate a semantic family which eventually spreads through modern languages. If this were so, this diffusion would have been really fast as the term *artesa*, to refer to the trades of the city of Valencia, can already be found in the city's *Manual de Consells* in the XIV century<sup>2</sup>.

The preexisting distinction between liberal and mechanical arts, will allow us to use the terms *artesa*, *artisan*, *artesano* and *artigiano* to appoint the latter in such a way that hereinafter every dictionary will establish an unequivocal association between crafts and manual trades. Such a differentiation constitutes a very significant element of a social structure in which the work itself did not hold a positive value but was considered as a burden characteristic of the lower classes.

It should also be noted that the dictionaries of the XVII, XVIII and XIX centuries do not register a lexical network development: *artisanal*, *artesanado* and *artesanía*<sup>3</sup>. In the last edition of the dictionary of the French Academy it is claimed that *artisanat* is a XX century term that has four meanings: the craftsman condition or occupation, the artisans' assembly; the production mode of the artisans or, by metonymy, the set of objects they produce. This new lexicon expresses a conception of craft as a general description of a field of activities and practices.

## II.1. The modern construction of craft

This vision of craft as a whole, as a fixed repertoire of trades based on manual production, occurs in contradistinction to industrial production and with the establishment of the specific and superior field of artistic creation.

### II.1.1 In contrast to the industrial

The efficiency of industrial production when supplying cheap goods and useful objects displaced and partly eliminated many craft trades. However, this process did not occur suddenly and abruptly. Although there already were highly evolved forms of the factory system in the XIX century, these systems are still a minority coexisting today with a vast world of workshops (Díez, 1990: 14-15).

Some trades were downgraded to a residual existence either because of their marginal position in the economic system or by their peripheral location in backward areas of the rural world; other trades have survived more or less vigorously under consistent adaptations. However, the medieval crafts, which do not only consist of a mode of production but also involve a system of trade organi-

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<sup>2</sup> *Corpus Informatizat del Catalá Antic* (<http://lexicon.uab.cat/>).

<sup>3</sup> In Spain, *artesanía* in 1947 and *artesanado* in 1970; for Italy, the above mentioned *Lessico*.

zation, a professional socialization process and above all a lifestyle, social status and reproduction, disappeared. All the basic elements – training, accumulation of knowledge by means of practice, manual production, adjustment between utility and decoration, tool skills, simultaneity between home and workplace, hierarchy and moral discipline, and gated communities of taste and practice with their systems of festivals, rituals and protection - were displaced from modern workplaces and private lives.

### II.1.2 The birth of the Arts

The signifier *ars* which had allowed us to encompass a wide array of practices started circumscribing to designate, firstly the noble and fine arts and then the aesthetic creation, in such a way that artisan craft was separated from art and design. Craftsman and artist, craft and art, craft and creativity, became clearly differentiated jobs and activities, which were symbolically and socially hierarchical. They distanced themselves in all senses: with respect to materials (ordinary and noble), the purpose (usefulness and expressiveness), the composition, the appearance (hand and touch, aspect, ideas and concepts) as well as the training systems and the social position.

The process of creating academies of fine arts separated from the crafts took up a long period of time but had culminated by the end of the XVIII century<sup>4</sup>. The ideological legitimation was supplied by Charles Batteux in *Les beaux arts réduits a un même principe* and in *Cours de belles arts* (1746), where it is defended that art must imitate the beauty of nature and distinguish itself from mechanical trades. This constitutes the first step toward the XIX century establishment of an autonomous field based on the aesthetic and creative dimension, whose only rule is, “art for the sake of art”.

The crafts were isolated, marginalized and devalued, in parallelism to the diffusion of urban lifestyles of high culture.

### II.2. Responses and reactions

These functional differentiating processes generated reactions and responses. There are two, of very different sign that deserve to be emphasized: the adaptation to industrial modernity by means of a movement in charge of creating specialized training centers on the one hand and on the other, the social and cultural criticism of the movement *Arts and Crafts*.

At the end of the XVIII century, and more clearly during the second half of the

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<sup>4</sup> In 1562, the Great Duke Cosimo I of Médicis founded the *Accademia delle Arti del Disegno*, which in 1784 was transformed in the *Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze*.

XIX century, there is a revitalization of the crafts through their transformation and adaptation to modernity. It is a movement, which rapidly spreads all over Europe creating conservatories and schools for artisans of different denominations. These institutions were run by certain authorities and Reform groups of the social élite, with a positive vision of industry and work and who developed a policy of paternalistic qualification of labor<sup>5</sup>.

The creation of these schools assumed a transformation of the crafts: in the guild, learning was oral and empathetic, they learned whilst they worked, but in the above mentioned schools, the competences were taught in specialized schools which offered authorized formal diplomas for the labour market based on the factory system.

Meanwhile, the denomination arts and crafts applied to a current that emerged in the last third of the nineteenth century in England and whose purpose was to criticize the mass production of machinery, dignify handmade crafts and promote the access of the products to the general public. William Morris (1834-1896) was considered the founder of this current.

The movement was to combine the useful with the beautiful (the simplicity which allows us to emphasize the qualities of the materials and the cultured sophistication) and it had two fronts: the social critique of industrial society, their utilitarian vision and their vulgar aesthetic and the attempt to overcome the growing distinction between craft, design and art, rejecting industrially produced artificial products. The success was meteoric: By the end of the century more than a hundred communities were following their philosophy in Great Britain and it was spreading all over Europe and the USA even periodical exhibitions were being held. *Arts and Crafts* underwent a conversion from the handicrafts to an artistic-cultural current of conservationism and innovating orientation, in some cases linked to nationalist movements (Ireland and Scotland) and in others to progressive reforms (USA). Its actors were people with high academic training; and their products, despite its revolutionary romanticism, ended up being acquired by the upper middle class of high intellectual level.

### III. The proliferation of meanings and practices

The most significant of what happened during great part of the XX century has to do, on the one hand, with the construction of a proper craft sector and on the other, with the proliferation of new values and meanings for the crafts, related among other factors to the heritagization and digitization of culture.

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<sup>5</sup> In 1794 l'abbé Henri sets up the *Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers* (CNAM), present today in 150 French cities.

### III.1. The construction of the artisanal sector

The delimitation of an artisanal sector is only possible where the economy is structured in terms of clearly distinct production areas, with specific policies and autonomous dynamics of organization and strategy. This is exactly what happens in modern societies and therefore among the heterogeneity of activities, enterprises and products, some may be conceived as part of a different wholeness called crafts or handicrafts. This identification is not far from problematic, but it certainly exists and it has established itself throughout the XX century, as we are shown by Cédric Perrin in the case of France: during the interwar period a craft policy was established reaching its full dimension in the 70s and culminating in 2013 with the approval of an agreement for the crafts.

Which elements should we highlight in this process? We can at least point out the following: the legal definition of the crafts and the scope of activities it comprises, the establishment of formal training and its corresponding academic title, the tax regulations, the assessment of the economic impact, the enactment of support measures, the creation of autonomous organizations for the defense of the sector and the conduction of marketing and promotional campaigns such as trade shows<sup>6</sup>.

Construction as a sector has reached a level of internationalization. Signs of this are the standardization of a definition coined by UNESCO in 1997, the attempts to articulate a policy of common ground in the single European market for companies of an artisanal character (ECA) or the presence and performance in the global scenario of transnational umbrella organizations (World Craft Council)<sup>7</sup>.

### III.2. The expressive values of the crafts

The transit toward consumer society in the first place and digital society in the next offers new opportunities for the recreation and redefinition of the crafts. Together with the crafts as a manual trade, producing goods of utilitarian function, postindustrial society approaches its redefinition by emphasizing expressiveness: the handicrafts are sources of pleasure, emotion and moral value as well as sources of identity, distinctiveness, community involvement and innovation. We shall address some of the scopes of value that are particularly important now that the crafts endow a new status.

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<sup>6</sup> In a research on Piemonte, it is said that more than 200 trade fairs were held in 2010 (vid. [http://www.regione.piemonte.it/artigianato/dwd/sistema\\_informativo/sistema\\_fiere\\_febr\\_2011.pdf](http://www.regione.piemonte.it/artigianato/dwd/sistema_informativo/sistema_fiere_febr_2011.pdf)).

<sup>7</sup> Michelsons, 2003 and <http://www.worldcraftscouncil.org/home.html>.

### III.2.1 Sense of tradition: the heritagization of the crafts

Craft activities and their products are increasingly considered as an integral part of the cultural heritage and collective identity. This heritagization of the crafts can be seen in many museums, in medieval-performances and festivals, in the recovery of old crafts, historic areas, indigenous handicrafts and in the creation of performing and conservation centers.

In the following table we have gathered data of the number of official museums recognized by the corresponding Ministries in Spain, France and Italy. The ranking categories are not homogeneous and a specific category for craft museums has not been entered but it is obvious that they can be found within several of them and should therefore reach a relevant overall figure.

Table 1: National museums by categories

	Spain	France	Italy
Archeology	196	438	580
Art	0	0	910
Art and Archeology	0	0	220
Contemporary art	124	84	0
Decorative Arts	28	345	0
Fine arts	231	452	0
House museum	91	0	0
Science and Technology	55	259	80
Natural science and Natural history	61	175	270
Site museums	51	0	0
Specialized	164	0	570
Ethnography and Anthropology	275	400	420
General	139	0	0
Historical	121	557	240
Other	20	0	0
Textiles and costumes	2	0	0
Extra European civilizations	0	89	0
Photography	0	26	0
Total	1558	2825	3290

Source: Own elaboration<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <http://directoriomuseos.mcu.es/dirmuseos/mostrarBusquedaGeneral.do>; [http://www.culture.gouv.fr/public/mistral/museo\\_fr](http://www.culture.gouv.fr/public/mistral/museo_fr). <http://www.museionline.it/services/chisiamo.php>.

However, very few museums do not have any craft objects. A clear example of this is the *Victoria and Albert Museum*.

### **III.3. A sense of distinction: conspicuous consumption**

In consumer societies of advanced modernity, the aesthetic dimension linked to social distinction provides new vitality to the crafts. This is something that Veblen had already intuited and diagnosed in his *Theory of leisure class* (1899). The main difference between machine and handmade goods, which serve for the same purpose, is usually that the first are more suitable for their primary purpose. They are a much more perfect product: they show a more perfect adaptation of the means to the ends. This does not save them from low esteem and depreciation, as they do not fill the requirements imposed by honorary wastage (Veblen, 1944: 132).

The consumer of the consumer society, of post-materialist values, pursues the personalization of the item as well as the uniqueness and exclusivity that will allow him to build a lifestyle of his own with its related social distinction: Product differentiation by means of narrative or discourse is metabolized by the possessor's individualization and public distinction. This value operates with great emphasis in advanced societies and among socio-culturally dominant social classes. Paradoxically there are still millions of people who despairingly aspire to own mass-produced commodities; it therefore affects small market niches, which would also be select, accommodated and structurally centered. An interaction between design, fashion, technique and brand is thus produced and this interaction returns to the crafts the aura that had been taken away from them by mass production. Moreover, the major brands vampirize the charisma of the crafts because, «the signs of the expensive become accepted as beautiful characteristics of pricey items» (Veblen, 1944: 136).

### **III.4. Sense of innovation and participation in the digital age**

Crafts connect to the communitarian and to participation in many ways but we are specially going to highlight its re-elaboration through *Do It Yourself* and *Maker* movements, a radical innovation as we change a professional craftsman for an amateur. Both movements refer to networks and people who carry out domestic work or people who make things for themselves, sometimes by explicit opposition to consumer society and other times to develop personal creativity. These amateurs differ from the professionals in the way they acquire their skills and by his or her expertise but, as Shirky (2010) has pointed out, they are always distinguished by their motivation. To do something for the pleasure of doing so is an intrinsic motivation.

Internet and digital social networks are changing the nature of amateurism: until their appearance, amateurs operated in private and domestic areas whilst

professionals operated in the market or in the public sphere. However, the network allows them not only to obtain information and communicate, but also to begin a new form of organization making it possible for a small contribution to aggregate themselves massively, creating lasting and extensive public and communal value products. (Wikipedia). However, when talking about digital products, Can we still talk about craft?

Digital culture involves dematerialization and infinite reproducibility at low cost while craft is based on the supposed uniqueness and authenticity of its products and also on the belief that, in last instance, people pursue a physical experience that cannot be replicated online. Artisans are not only using the full potential of digital culture, but as is claimed by Mario Carpo, if variability is the brand of handmade things, the present digital technology will also allow an indefinite variability, programmed through an automatized process of the personalization of the goods.

To all this must be added a new Copernican spin, the third industrial *revolution*, namely, personal digital manufacturing favored by new machines capable of transforming bits into atoms, as already occurs with 3D printers. This revolution is based on a democratization of technology as it is less important *what* is produced than *who* actually produces it. The *Maker* movement is organized in digital guilds which advocates for open learning without hierarchies, postulates open hardware, has its own media, creates *Fablabs*<sup>9</sup>, meets in *Makerspaces* and organizes its own events (*Make Haven*). Movement members are aware that *maker* is just another name for the artisan (at least for the *soft* artisan), but at the same time they also try to indicate how creative, communicative (without secrets) and cooperative they are. The members also remind us that they generate social goods (Anderson, 2012: 17).

#### IV. The artisan's dignity

The historical distinction between liberal and mechanical arts was based on a dualistic anthropology (*episteme y techne*) and on a hierarchical policy (which devaluated physical work): for some the ideas, for others the objects. The recent success of *The Craftsman* (Sennett, 2008) is based on the allegation against this disjunction and its impact on advanced capitalism, but it also assumes an achronic and essentialist insight of the crafts, identified with the imperative of quality.

Our perspective has tried to show that the crafts have not ceased to change and that today, in a society of advanced modernity, through the organization of industry and lobbies, through emphasis on the values of identity, distinction

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<sup>9</sup> <http://fab.cba.mit.edu/about/labs/>.

and collective creativity, and through the democratization of the trade is when greater relevance is acquired *l'intelligence de la main* (Jacquet) and the *saper fare* (Benini).

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