

CRAFT: STATUS, PERCEPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN DESIGN

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A questioning of traditional perceptions of craft has led to an international reassessment and reappraisal of its role.

Within the contemporary South African situation, some designers are looking to the indigenous cultures that have rich craft heritages, as an inspiration for their own work and as a means of establishing a national identity.

The history of design did not begin with eighteenth century mechanization. It began in the early Stone Age when there was a need to make objects of use. Those objects were made by hand, which itself is the earliest tool. The hand is certainly the most basic tool that we have, but it is surely also the most sophisticated when combined with the human intellect and creativity. Why then the denigration of handwork in the various phases of industrialization and technological progress, and more specifically its subsidiary status in relation to design?

The segregation of craft from the technological world of design and its subsidiary status may be attributed to a number of factors. The two most important are perhaps the position assigned to craft within the historic stages of capitalism and the equation of craft with women's work. Both served to marginalise craft because of its perceived failure to promote individual advancement and its lack of significant and direct contribution to capitalist economy.

CRAFT AND CAPITALISM

Leatt, Kneifel and Nurnberger (1986) divide capitalism into seven historical

stages, namely subsistence economy, slavery, feudalism, pre-industrial or merchant capitalism, early industrial capitalism, twentieth century capitalism (which may be divided into the two major stages of pre- and post-World War II), and late or mature capitalism. An examination of the place of craft within each of these scenarios reveals a gradual erosion of its status.

Within a subsistence economy, craft found its place in the making of necessary and functional items which contributed directly to daily living. Craft was not segregated from production, it complemented and facilitated production. In addition, it was seen to be a 'collective' enterprise, that is the work and property of the family and not of an individual.

In the effort to rise above the toil of mere subsistence, the introduction of slaves allowed 'owners' to relinquish hand and manual work to a slave who then became skilled in particular areas. This means of craft production was used to increase the wealth and status of the 'owner', and did little to improve the advancement of the maker. Some of the most renowned craftwork remains anonymous because it was done by slaves. Examples of this abound in the historic furniture and masonry of early Cape Colonial times.

In feudal and pre-industrial times, craft flourished as an integral part of society. Under the influence of strong spiritual faith, magnificent examples of craft were created by the combined teamwork of entire villages. In the case of the Gothic cathedral there was little concern for material reward and the craftwork became an embodiment of the community's faith. The writings of John Ruskin and others served to equate the craft of the Gothic and Medieval periods with a deep morality.

The Industrial Revolution in England and the resultant loss of quality in machine-made furniture and products gave rise to the Arts and Crafts Movement. Led by William Morris, the Movement encouraged a revival of the Medieval guild system whereby crafts people worked together to produce small runs of handmade products. The intention was to bring craftwork of quality to the person in the street, but the irony was that this handwork was so time-consuming and costly to produce that only wealthy merchants could afford to buy it. Craft could not compete economically with mass production.

Twentieth century capitalism championed the industrial process and in both pre- and post-war stages, production and progress were, in capitalist language, synonymous with success. Competition, marketing and



advertising assumed increasing importance and products no longer spoke for themselves, as Ruskin advocated they should do, through form and spirit. Multinational corporations and monopolies dominated a global market and the individual ingenuity and initiative allowed for by early capitalism was replaced by an institutionalized process of considerable power.

In mature capitalism, the value system of society became imbued with the synthetic world. The period of the 1980s was characterised by automation, electronic control, nuclear power and the concentration of economic and productive capacity in a few global centres. Within this scenario craft was a lost cause. Speed and power did not combine with natural materials and time-consuming handwork.

CRAFT AND PATRIARCHY

The status of craft was further eroded during the historic development of capitalism because of its association with women's work: women's work being essentially that which is done in the home. Capitalism operates on a profit and loss basis and homecrafts were not seen as part of this system.

Since housewives do not appear to sell their labour, and do not generate surplus value, their contribution to production has been marginalised (Myers 1982:49).

In a subsistence economy, the production undertaken by the women in the family unit was part of the communal effort and there was no distinct segregation of work. Women worked the land as did the men, but most of the

pottery and weaving was done by the women-folk.

Over a period of time, men took on more of the heavy manual labour and women specialized in craftwork immediately associated with the home. This practice became inculcated into society's norms and craftwork came to be regarded as 'homecrafts' in later periods. Being associated with the home, it was consequently classified as 'women's work'. The pre-industrial era saw a strengthening of such activities in the home.

Early industrial capitalism, accompanied by urbanization and the exploitation of women and children in the factory system, changed the structure of society. However, those families that remained intact throughout the years of transition, still maintained the home and the domestic sphere as the domain of the woman. Any 'work' that was done there (craft or otherwise) was regarded as women's work and not significant in the developing capitalist economy. Both theoretically and practically speaking, early industrial capitalism and early twentieth century capitalism were patriarchal constructs which excluded women and their crafts.

The two World Wars brought about an upheaval in the male oriented world. The men went to fight and the women went to 'work' (the implication being that women had not 'worked' before). This shift, and the later so-called 'appliance revolution' in post-war society, caused a slow demise in the craft tradition within the home. Nevertheless, the connection between craft and women's work was maintained, as was the perception of women's work making a lesser contribution. Craft,

handwork, women's work and non-profitability were regarded as not being synonymous with capitalism.

NEW PERCEPTIONS

The 1990s have brought an alarming realisation of the dangers inherent in the exploitation of the earth's limited resources, environmental pollution, the development and stockpiling of destructive weapons and the increasing gap between the poor and rich countries. In 1994 it is perhaps timeous to consider shifts within capitalism. Warning bells are beginning to ring and a 'new craft' is being spoken of.

This questioning of the consequences of capitalism, coupled to Postmodern and feminist thinking have led to a reassessment and reappraisal of the role of craft. In art and design, an intensive departure from traditional perceptions of craft and its status has manifested itself. The 'art-craft' debate is being hotly contested across the world. Smith (1993:44) writes of the thorny questions surrounding the differences between the 'decorative arts', the 'applied arts', 'craft' and 'design'. He feels that the notion of craft being subsidiary is intellectually indefensible.

Paul Greenhalgh (1993:16) argues for a new reading of 'craft':

... there has been a broad insistence that the genres we gather under the heading 'craft' are essentially Luddite activities, preserved or invented as stalwarts against the advance of machinery. They have been characterised as modes of production adopted by an isolated few for moral



reasons: craft as rurality and technological redundancy, located in Utopia and fêted by liberal, high bourgeois consumers. In other words, machinery has been allowed to define 'craft', and the genres it represents, by focusing attention on what it apparently is not.

Greenhalgh also writes about the need to bury the embarrassment associated with crafts. He states that

... design history generates a kind of ideology of embarrassment around the crafts, which obliges us to be ashamed of their delicacies, contradictions and idiosyncrasies (1993:16).

CRAFT IDEALISM AND DESIGN IN SOUTH AFRICA

In post-election South Africa, we find ourselves in a society comprising first and third world components, which include various types of capitalism simultaneously. Large international and national conglomerates exist side-by-side with burgeoning small businesses and industries. These smaller concerns are representative of people who have had to (or choose to) use their own initiative and take their chances outside the constraints of formal trade and industry.

People are suddenly proud of being South African. With the shackles of apartheid discarded, so too is the destructive guilt that went with it. It is as if people want to celebrate their South Africanism and what better way than through the making of products that say something about the intrinsic nature of our country.

The post-election era therefore appears to be an ideal time for craft to undergo a renaissance, and as a result of the unique blend of communities and cultures that exist in this country, a variety of expressions is emerging. Products are finding a ready market amongst people who want to own something with a personal meaning. Peter Dormer (1990:32) refers to the psychological and ideological reasons for buying craft:

...what they are buying first of all, is a general set of metaphors about the kind of labour that has produced them, the way of life that produces them, and a visual language that is easily understood.

Within the contemporary South African situation, this 'set of metaphors' would possibly include personal associations with ideas of Africa and its traditions. Defining and listing such a set of metaphors could be considered 'essentialist'. Lize van Robbroeck (1993:51) has reviewed the problems encountered in this process with regard to white scholarship of black art:

The idea that an innate 'Africanness' infuses 'black art' with a particular, recognisable aesthetic apparently exercised power over the imagination of white critics and black artists alike.

The same problems exist when faced with providing a critique of design that reveals signs of South Africa's transition. In the process of changing the identity of 'Design in South Africa' to 'South African Design' there are probably many types of essentialism. The generalizations that form the practice of 'essentialism' imply a credible consensus opinion that endorses 'otherness'. Problematic words such as ethnic, traditional, tribal and mystical can be included in

this category. The Postmodern tendency to deconstruct the concept of 'otherness' is possibly present in the South African striving to reconcile differences. This reconciliation may be evident in the 'Western' or 'white' apparent need to absorb essential aspects of African craft and design. Some South Africans are looking back to the indigenous cultures that have rich craft traditions.

Two notable examples of young designers who characterise some of these tendencies are Haldane Martin and John Vogel. Both recently returned from exhibiting at the 1994 International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York where the South African Ministry of Trade and Industry subsidised their exhibition space.



Martin (1994) spoke about the existence of a 'new craft', a new definition of craft in post-election South Africa. This is a craft that is not necessarily based on the exclusive use of natural materials and handmade methods of production, but a craft that allows for free creative thought within the manifold possibilities of the technological age. Martin believes that the design of a product must communicate successfully with people and that it will do this if it possesses what he calls 'energy'. This communication will enable the product/design to be financially successful as well as fulfil the needs of the consumer (or more appropriately the 'person'). This is counter to mature capitalism and consumption which has led to the exclusion of individual identity and a consequent anonymity in product development ².

If it is true that a 'new craft' is emerging out of the need to re-invigorate South African society and economy, then it may also be suggested that the wheel of history is turning to herald a second Arts and Crafts Movement. The first Arts and Crafts Movement was established in reaction to trends in industrial production which were considered negative. A revival of this way of thinking can be seen now, both in South Africa and internationally.

It is increasingly apparent that places like Africa are becoming more and more intriguing for those in search of authentic ideas. John Vogel (1994) said that in South Africa there are '200 years of untapped resources'. Haldane Martin referred to the need for 'integrity' in design which was/is present in the making of craft work. Perhaps an integration of practices, approaches and theories will result in designs that have that much needed integrity. Both designers feel that both the right time and ideas are currently present in South Africa:

The Americans thought our work was so fresh...easily identifiable as South African because the display and the work had a raw, rough and unrefined quality (Martin & Vogel 1994).

Notes

1. Essentialism refers to the notion that it is the essence of certain things that identifies and sets them apart from other things. In order to fit into a certain category, an object would have to possess certain essences that define its character or nature.

2. An increasing awareness of the individual as opposed to merely the 'market sector' is dawning on design and manufacturing:

But this accent on filling the emotional gap encountered in modern, universal products is just a part of a wider objective: getting closer than ever before to consumers (or 'people', as they are starting to be called again at Phillips) (Evamy 1994:18).

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Illustrations:

- 1 John Vogel - Side tables
2 Haldane Martin - CD stand

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Today, South Africa faces many challenges in which the communications industry plays a vital part. The relationship between designer and printer remains as critical as ever. Printed products of only the highest visual and technical standards will allow South Africa to compete internationally. Nationally, the development programme demands a sensitivity towards cultural and economic factors in printed communications.

These challenges provide designers an opportunity to use the full spectrum of unique ideas, colours and textures inherent in our country's culture, geography and history. The co-operative partnership of designer and printer will make a substantial contribution to effective communication.

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Creda Press has consultants in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg who are trained to advise designers on the best way of producing a job. From assistance in selecting appropriate materials and technology to meet deadlines, there is a commitment to making sure that the end product matches the designer's vision and standards. Creda Press is able to go beyond just doing the job.

Our professionalism, knowledge, diligence, integrity and above all, the fact that we care about people, places us in a unique position to uphold that special bond between designer and printer.

David de Bruyn

David de Bruyn is the Managing Director of Creda Press Natal. Creda Press, established in the Cape 35 years ago, is one of the largest privately owned printing companies in South Africa with operations in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg.

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