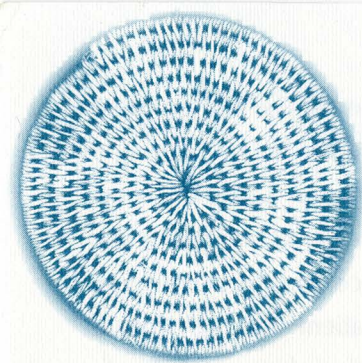




CRAFT & DESIGN

Bev Gower

The ability of craft to express the vitality of a culture has not had a significant impact on design in this country. South Africa's rich and diverse craft heritage needs to be reappraised by designers for the contributions it could make.

Five years ago when I was given the go-ahead by my director to enrol students for a new industrial design course at the Cape Technikon, we took a decision not to emulate the prestigious design schools of Europe and America, graduating students for super sophistication and high technology. We elected rather to look at the reality of where we stood. At our market with its thin first world crust and at a manufacturing industry that is not educated in the use of designers. We considered our approach should be appropriate to the circumstances and that we should allow the programme to adapt to changes in these circumstances.

Well the word got out in our small South African design world that 'Bev Gower was starting a craft course down in Cape Town'. Possibly the word appropriate was misconstrued as alternative, nevertheless I believe it was meant to be a disparaging association. Anyway, at the time I took it that way, making hasty efforts to correct the misconception in case it would affect the enrolment of students.

By way of an introduction, I have used this little story to illustrate the general perception of craft in the design fraternity. How it seems to project a somewhat lowly status, and is often identified with repetitious work performed by people with more time on their hands than creativity in them.

I should like to suggest that more attention be given to a pursuit of which we are all aware but seldom consider for its value, or encourage for the contribution it can make in our society. In attempting to propose craft as a cultural influence and a vehicle for educating designers it is necessary to establish its current meaning.

THE MEANING OF CRAFT

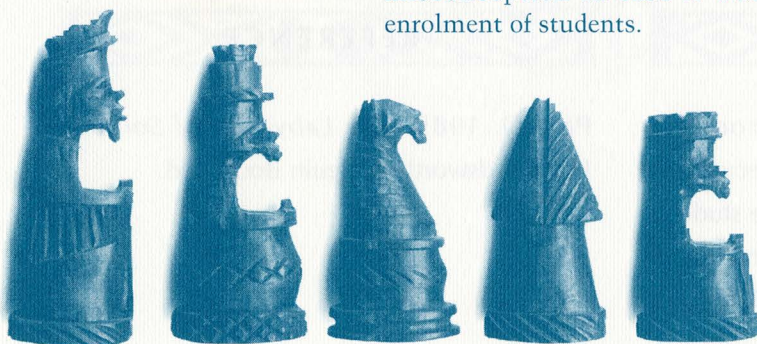
Simply put, I would say there are three stages in the evolution of craft in the Western world which help to establish its contemporary sense. First is the long period of slow development from the early stirrings of primitive man up to the advent of the Renaissance.

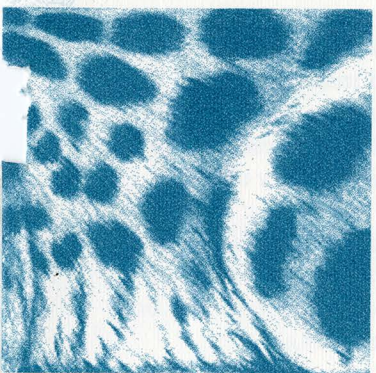
Surrounded as we are today by manufactured products which support our daily lives, it is difficult to appreciate a time when any object, plus the tools to make it, had to be fashioned by hand, with great skill and contemplation, using naturally available material. It is understandable then how both tool and object took on a significance above their intrinsic value, and how embellishments acquired

spiritual associations. Each artefact, apart from being unique, had a life and a value of its own and the maker earned the respect and appreciation of the community. The process of making was a part of the process of living. Products grew out of a need, reflecting the culture in which they evolved. They were the primary means of creative expression, the art of the people. It was during this period that the phenomenon of the guild system emerged which was to influence the nature of craft for many centuries.

The second relevant and identifiable phase in the evolution of craft came about during the Renaissance when a change in attitude effected the separation of craft from art. A new atmosphere of freedom of thought brought an upsurge of individual creative energy with it. Under a system of patronage, painters, sculptors and architects emerged in their own right. Craftsmen however, although admired for their skills, were not able to follow the artist into the Renaissance. Apart from goldsmiths, the crafts generally remained tied to a process of accumulated knowledge locked within the control of the guilds.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and into the nineteenth, a decline in the traditional concept of craft occurred. With the rise in economic status of a middle class, the demand was for an increase in the quantity of goods rather than for quality. This in turn accelerated the rate of industrialization,





changing craftsmen through the division of labour into piece workers and with mechanization, into machine minders. The tradition of craftsmanship virtually disappeared and the pride of an individual in being responsible for a completed article was replaced by a tedious process of repeatedly making the same part, to be passed on to other workers before final assembly.

The 1851 Great Exhibition held in London was intended to focus the attention of the public on the achievements of industry incorporating an artistic contribution. But there were those who were appalled at 'the absence of any fixed principles in ornamental design' as stated in *The Times* (Naylor 1980:14). The most far reaching commentary came from the idealistic writings of John Ruskin, who exposed the unsuccessful marriage of art and industry. His publications were read by William Morris, who was then studying at Oxford, and were instrumental in Morris becoming a dominant figure in a movement which established a new meaning for craft.

Morris argued for greater self-expression and a revival of the crafts in individual workshops, away from factories. He saw the practising of craft not only as an aesthetic endeavour, but also as a symbol of a class struggle for



recognition. Although Morris' socialist dream did not take root, the idealism of the craftsmen of the Cotswolds was intrinsic to the developments of the early years of the modernist movement, particularly those of the Bauhaus.

The crafters faded from the limelight as the machine ethic pervaded the western world. The industrial revolution was over, its structural changes to society had become a way of life.

Now that new structural changes are affecting societies worldwide as they try to cope with a revolution of electronics, the microchip and a communications explosion, the significance of craft is again emerging. This archetypal response to threatening social change, a reaching for some personal and cultural reassurance from the past, gives meaning to craft.

CRAFT IN SOUTH AFRICA

The archetypal response of seeking reassurance through craft is relevant in South Africa as well, where we see an increasing interest in craft making in urbanized communities, both white and black. With craft markets well patronized and the products of pavement stalls sought after, crafters have found a respected niche in our society.

In this country we are fortunate in that we are still able to experience a dual manifestation of craft. The material cultures of our indigenous black populations in rural areas have been virtually untouched by an industrial revolution. I have often thought that if William Morris could have visited a traditional Zulu kraal, he would have found his ideal.

An important aspect of craft in South Africa is where indigenous and European sources have blended through acculturation. On the one hand, whites have involved themselves with traditional black material culture to encourage

and promote latent skills in dormant crafts, and through their involvement influenced the direction of the work. On the other hand examples can be found where traditional European crafts have been introduced into black communities, and as a result an African quality has given a new impetus to these imported methods.

Craft has thus provided a most effective medium for social interaction and promoting understanding between different cultural groups. Unfortunately the ability of craft to express the vitality of a culture, has not had a significant impact on design in this country.

CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION

A good example of craft's influence on design, requires that we dip once more into history and briefly remind ourselves of the later stages of the Arts and Crafts Movement. A German architect, Hermann Muthesius, who had spent some time in England where he became familiar with the doctrines of William Morris, was instrumental in the foundation of the Deutsche Werkbund whose aim it was to bring designers and industry together. It was from this influence that Peter Behrens' successful association with AEG produced some of the first examples of industrial design.

In the early period of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius said that he believed that

... the best training for a young designer or architect would have been the old type of apprenticeship to a master-craftsman who had both the aesthetic and practical aspects of his craft at his finger ends (Robertson 1961:135).

Later in the mid 1950s, Reyner Banham, the noted British historian, commented:

... the human chain of pioneers of the Modern Movement that extends back from Gropius to William Morris, and beyond him to Ruskin, Pugin and William Blake, does not extend forward from Gropius. The precious vessel of handicraft aesthetics that has been passed from hand to hand, was dropped and broken and no one has bothered to pick up the pieces (Naylor 1980:10).

There were instances though where the vessel had not been dropped, Scandinavia being perhaps the most significant example. Here the craft tradition escaped the industrialization of Europe. Early examples of Functionalism from Sweden in the 1930s found international recognition. Then in post-war Denmark designs in furniture, fabrics and a variety of household ware emerged in most compelling new forms which were fundamentally modern but reflected the essence of customary Danish craft. This profound conjunction of craft and industry was to bring the names of a breed of designer such as Arne Jacobsen to the attention of the world.

An observation which I would like to make when considering the Scandinavian countries, is how they illustrate the need for craft to be isolated to some extent, to escape the mainstream of industrial growth. It seems to require time for the maturation of skills and

processes where the pace of development can take on a natural rhythm.

By way of contrast to this natural rhythm, design is primarily driven by industry whose pattern is dictated by commerce. Here the ever increasing importance of fashion to design means that all new trends are open to commercial manipulation. The old purist slogan 'form follows function' is being replaced by 'styling follows sales'.

Current circumstances in the marketing of sedan cars illustrates this attitude most clearly. Increasingly as we observe each new model taking its place on the road, it would seem as if there were some information on the popular aspects of styling which has been circulated to all the manufacturers. The result has been an amazing similarity in all makes despite the culture of their country of origin.

One explanation given to me was that popular features are researched internationally by manufacturers and the resulting dimensions fed into computers which then produce the 'guaranteed to please' shape. I contacted a friend who is a designer in the motor industry to verify this theory. His response was that it is most unlikely, but he gave me other information which does suggest the reason for the loss of brand identity.

California, according to my source, has achieved over the years a reputation for being a centre of innovative automobile design. I was

given the names of manufacturers who have established studios in this area, and feel it necessary to list them to emphasise the point - Audi, Volkswagen, Toyota, Chrysler, General Motors, Honda, Hyundai, Isuzu, Mazda, Mercedes Benz, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Subaru and Volvo. Two American companies out of a list of fourteen.

The question must be asked why all these companies have given up a national identity in favour of creating some international norm in styling.

I am sure there are many possible answers in terms of economics and marketing, but I must still ask, as a buyer, why I am no longer able to identify and select a particular design character that reflects a culture and country of origin.

A final comment on the new shapes of vehicles relates to some information circulating in the motor design fraternity. It concerns the body styling of the latest Honda range.

Apparently the design team was sent to Rio de Janeiro to study the shapes that frequent the beaches there. A pleasant task for those involved no doubt, but I wonder where design is going when a Japanese company who has a studio in California, needs to go to Rio to find the shape for its new model. Next time you are beside a new Honda at a traffic light, give some thought as to what part of the anatomy of the Girl from Ipanema you are 'perving'.

DESIGN EDUCATION AND CRAFT

Returning to the cultural contribution of craft, the following instance is a counter to the

