Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19th-20th Century

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‘Making is thinking’, according to the sociologist and philosopher Richard Sennett.\(^1\) It has long been recognised that the humblest of craft objects, often (though not exclusively) produced using materials and methods which differ from those used in industrial production, have the potential to offer alternatives to the dominant culture and to challenge conventional ways of living. But do the ideas and political meanings inherent in craft objects and practices translate into social action? Does a consideration for craftsmanship lead to a concern for the craftsman?

To take just one example, there is much evidence to indicate that 21st century shoppers are becoming more conscious about the conditions in which their clothes are produced, with the rise of organisations like the Craftivist Collective and pressure groups such as ‘Love Fashion Hate Sweatshops’ receiving widespread media attention, alongside a quiet, but significant, upswing in home sewing.\(^2\) Yet market research has shown that, in the year following the Rana Plaza factory disaster, sales of cheap ready-made clothing from UK retailers which had used Rana Plaza suppliers soared.\(^3\) Likewise, historians of fashion point out that while there is believed to have been a surge in the popularity of amateur dressmaking in the mid-twentieth century, spending on materials for homemade garments as a proportion of all consumer expenditure on clothing actually declined – suggesting that the trend was partly fuelled either by the availability of cheap,
mass-produced fabrics or a desire for social distinction, rather than social responsibility. And it is widely acknowledged that a similar knot of motives often underpinned the more lofty aspirations of 19th-century handicrafts revivals. The history of craft cannot be disentangled from histories of class, consumerism and production, nor from industrial capitalism itself.

These are just some of the themes dealt with in Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, the latest volume in Ashgate’s Histories of Material Culture and Collecting, 1700–1950 series. Edited by Janice Helland, Beverly Lemire and Alena Buis, and arising from a 2011 conference held at the Material Culture Institute at the University of Alberta, the book features research from historians and art historians, scholars working in museum and material culture studies, as well as curators. Together, they bring fresh perspectives to the study of non-industrial craft in a fascinating variety of contexts during the 19th and 20th centuries, from the shores of Lake Ontario to the North Island of New Zealand; from colonial India to Colonial Revival collections in New Castle, Delaware; and rural County Donegal, Ireland to the West End of London. Collectively, the essays demonstrate that, across the globe, craft was deeply invested in modernity and vice versa.

All the authors in this collection are committed to recovering, as far as possible, the voices of marginalised people, and several chapters highlight the possibility of finding in artisanal objects evidence of subaltern agency and resistance that may have been hidden in previous histories. (Each study is attentive to the varied meanings terms such as ‘art’ and ‘craft’ could have in different contexts). In a thought-provoking discussion of the politics of different craft movements around the world at the turn of the 20th century, Edward S. Cooke, Jr. argues that scholars must attend to the lives of the people involved in producing craft goods in order to examine the ‘experience of incongruity’ in the practical application of imperial power in culture and society (p. 22). In this way, the study of material culture can complicate conventional narratives of global encounter. The essay elegantly situates the more typically studied English, European and United States Arts and Crafts movements and related handicraft revivals in their wider context, extending the debate into other regions – though notably Cooke is the only writer here to deal with communities in Africa.

Did changes in the relationship between craft and community arise organically, or were they prompted by the pressures of modernisation? (pp. 3–4). Claire Wintle’s research into the communities which came under British control on the Andaman Islands of India during the late 19th century eloquently calls into question the assumption that artisanal goods made for colonial markets can speak only of subjugation and the creeping homogenisation of indigenous cultures. Wintle argues forcefully that engaging in handicraft for purposes of trade enabled islanders to protect their own distinctive cultural practices, gender relations and social arrangements, even as they became entangled in a civilising mission which saw dwindling numbers of Great Andamanese confined to government-run homes and compelled to adopt Western consumption habits.

In the absence of written records, objects contain multitudes. Here, the making of embellished pandanus-leaf body adornments, for example, was rooted in customary Andamanese forms of household production and labour – Wintle swiftly dismisses the claim that these goods ‘represent the British desire to instil a work ethic in the Andamanese’, since long before the arrival of colonial officials much of women’s working life had been taken up by this craft – whilst drawing upon the Great Andamanese’s flair for creative adaptation and negotiation with outside influences. Closer inspection of examples in museum collections reveals that waist adornments incorporated an assemblage of Andaman Island materials, such as shells, alongside turquoise glass beads procured from exchanges with Europeans. Partly on account of the fact that these goods were never made solely out of economic necessity, they remained embedded in, and thus helped preserve, Andamanese design along with their histories and worldviews. Wintle suggests that, in this instance, craft can be recognised as a powerfully ‘creative and positive response’ to the experience of oppression (p. 146).

In Conal McCarthy’s paper, craftwork emerges as a similarly potent weapon in the M?ori struggle for political and cultural recognition in early 20th-century New Zealand. Enthusiasm for some of the central tenets of the British Arts and Crafts movement had led to a taste for indigenous design among intellectuals, artists and curators, and M?ori crafts soon found their way into international public exhibitions and public
and private collections. During the inter-war period, vast halls devoted to M?ori art were installed at the very
centre of galleries in Wellington and Auckland, and, significantly, M?ori design came to adorn the walls of
the meeting room of the Native Affairs Committee in the nation’s parliament. Indeed, M?ori politicians, in
collaboration with community leaders and members of the Young M?ori Party, had taken advantage of this
revivalist mood to establish the School of M?ori Arts and Crafts in 1926, which promoted local training in
skilled carving and secured funding for the restoration of traditional meeting houses in tribal communities.
By the 1940s, indigenous art had become a vital ‘part of the nation’s common heritage’ (p. 73).

The scholars in this volume are keen to probe perspectives which have described the function of revivalist
forms of material culture as primarily reactionary or anti-modern. McCarthy’s chapter looks beyond the
fringe organisations usually associated with craft in the early 20th century to consider its importance as a
political tool by which M?ori communities could practically negotiate the terms of their representation in
New Zealand civic, institutional, and economic life, often in the face of official and societal discrimination.
The global blossoming of the Arts and Crafts sensibility among a select élite had helped M?ori material
culture enter the capital’s museums and government buildings ‘like a Trojan horse in the citadel of European
high culture’. Although the M?ori were continually proceeding delicately ‘between assimilation and self-
determination’, their creative engagement, through hybrid craft practices, with the dominant settler way of
life and government policy in the arts is read as evidence that ‘the colonial encounter was productive as well
as destructive’ of indigenous material culture (p. 59). ‘The rising trajectory of M?ori arts and crafts’,
McCarthy writes, ‘illustrates how these practices can be seen not in terms of resignation, nostalgia for the
past and cultural loss, but as symbols of survival, strength and confidence in the future’ (p. 74).

Anne de Stecher likewise argues that the ‘contact zones’ in which colonisers and colonised meet can be
viewed as sites ‘for the assertion of indigenous autonomy, agency, and distinct identity’. Her study focuses
on the ‘souvenir art’ of the Huron-Wendat First Nation of Wendake, Quebec: hybrid articles of dress and
objets d’art embellished with exquisite dyed-moosehair appliqué and embroidery and incorporating
European artistic traditions. Though their manufacture involved the majority of the community, souvenirs
were typically finished by groups of highly-skilled women, and, unusually, the names of individual female
artists survive with these objects in museum collections. De Stecher considers the ways in which this
specialised craft production could sustain collective traditions and identities over the long term, whilst
playing an important role at particular moments in mediating political relations with different settler nations
and cementing diplomatic alliances. De Stecher concludes that whilst there may have been ‘coercion, radical
inequality in power relations and intractable conflict ... Indigenous nations did not necessarily act as
subservient colonised subjects, nor necessarily see themselves in that way’ (p. 51).

The writers in this collection expertly tease out the stories of communities and individuals whose lives have
tended to be hidden from histories of art and design, and it is striking how often the work of women in
promoting indigenous craft comes to the fore. Anne Whitelaw looks at a group of Canadian museum
volunteers who were instrumental in bringing Inuit material culture to a wider audience during the mid 20th
century. Continuing the work of scholars who have examined North American women’s role in garnering
critical attention for modern or marginalised forms of art (7), she draws on a range of archival material to
show that women’s committees (along with the mostly-female members of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild)
acted as important intermediaries between the federal government, commercial enterprises, and the art
world. During this period, unpaid women took on many responsibilities in administration, merchandising
and fundraising which would later be taken over by professionals. One of their most significant legacies, for
historians of collecting, was the marketing of so-called ‘Eskimo handicrafts’. Whitelaw argues that, in
monitoring production quality and ensuring these goods found their way into respectable retail outlets,
volunteers were fundamental in transforming these goods into ‘Inuit art’, bringing them both to a wider
public and, later, into museum and gallery collections.

Alena Buis turns our attention to another figure whose contributions have often received short shrift in
institutional histories: that of the woman collector. The socialite and Colonial Revival specialist Louise
Crowninshield was commissioned by the Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities in 1937 to
source and gather examples of historic craft objects for the Dutch House in New Castle, popularly believed
at the time to date back to the colonial period. In common with many contemporary ‘antiquers’, male and female, Crowninshield prioritised aesthetics over historical accuracy. Buis notes that none of the pieces that she or her network of amateur collector colleagues picked up for the Dutch House were specifically connected to the building or its inhabitants; rather they represented the best of what was available at the time from fashionable Madison Avenue dealers and East Coast auction sales. Her ‘efforts were dismissed at the time as “decorative” and therefore not worth recording’, despite the fact, for instance, that it had been Crowninshield who had introduced Henry Francis du Pont – her younger brother – to early American decorative arts and encouraged him to begin his own collection, later to become the foundation of the Winterthur Museum (p. 89). Buis and Whitelaw both point out, however, that it was craft’s increasingly valued, but ultimately low-status position in the context of the art museum which gave women in particular opportunities to mark out their position in professional and cultural circles; their contributions were thus ‘simultaneously significant and subordinate’ (p. 95).

As it will have become clear, an underlying theme woven through all the essays in this book is the rising appreciation for artisanal goods after the late 19th century - both as commodities in ‘handmade economies’ that could bind together communities in a competitive global marketplace (p. 197); and as markers of social distinction and cultural capital in the homes of individual collectors. Lily Crowther’s paper links this development more closely to social change and to a different kind of politics: that of everyday life. Taking a bird’s-eye view of the rapidly expanding metropolis, she argues that the suburban building boom in London in the late-Victorian and Edwardian era which increased the demand for locally-based, skilled craftsmen ‘reflected new kinds of relationships between labour, manufacturing and consumers in an age of unprecedented wealth’ (p. 177). The mass investment in vernacular architecture brought with it the reinvigoration of idealised ‘craft traditions and community values’, she asserts, and thus helped establish modern ideological frameworks for middle-class living (p. 190). The idea of a suburb or town as a ‘craft’ object carrying political meaning is an intriguing one – certainly the frameworks established in this book could be extended to include other features of the built environment, such as gardens.

Whether the rising status of craftwork led to material improvements in the lives of craftworkers during this period is another matter, however. Two chapters deal with the thorny issues of paternalism and sustainability in the fostering of arts and crafts practices in more depth. Janice Helland’s contribution to this volume asks to what extent the Donegal Industrial Fund, an organisation committed to the revival of Irish cottage industries, can be considered a ‘fair trade network’. Established by the London-based social reformer Alice Hart in 1883, the Fund aimed to promote artisanal skills such as spinning and weaving, as well as encouraging the use of locally-sourced natural dyes. The scheme was criticised by contemporary journalists for its apparently misguided philanthropy, but Helland contends that adopting such a perspective is inaccurate: to portray the Irish communities subsidised by the Fund as ‘helpless’ or Hart herself as patronising – an interfering ‘lady of the manor’ according to one scholar of the Arts and Crafts movement – is to ignore the full complexity of their relationship. Hart and her colleagues worked tirelessly to connect craftworkers in County Donegal with urban markets in Europe and North America in the hope of encouraging their financial independence: in 1885 a shop was opened at the heart of London’s fashionable West End for the sale of Donegal tweeds; the workers’ famed ‘Kells embroideries’ were included in numerous international exhibitions, often winning awards; and Hart’s networking secured royal and aristocratic patronage and, with it, extensive press coverage, for her workers and their artistry. Far from mounting a doomed rearguard action against globalisation, Helland represents Hart as the astute superintendent of a ‘voluntarist, non-statist development strategy’ which had the potential to support underprivileged rural communities in an increasingly industrialised economy (p. 130).

If the Donegal Industrial Fund fulfils one measure of a ‘fair trade network’, that of actively supporting and returning profits to producers, its success in another area – that of campaigning for more equitable relations between trading partners (p. 125) – is more ambiguous. As with the public face of the Indian and Japanese craft industries in Britain during this period, as Cooke explains in his discussion, an important part of the marketing of rural handicrafts at public exhibitions was the construction of an idealised, rustic ‘village’ scene in which workers, surrounded by their wares, demonstrated craft skills for paying visitors. Helland
argues convincingly that these tableaux, however sanitised, served to replace the depersonalised nature of globalised trade with a deeper bond between maker and consumer; the names of the Donegal embroiderers and weavers who appeared in these exhibitions were even announced in local newspapers. But her work does raise questions as to the tangible political impact of the scheme, particularly as it was received differently in different milieux. That part of Hart’s ‘Irish Village’ at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 could be viewed ‘from the Restaurant’, as revealed in a contemporary sketch, suggests that on a practical level the performance may have created divides between craftworkers and their audiences even as it brought these communities together in other ways (p. 135). Helland notes that there were limits to the political messages that material culture could convey: the commercial arena of the Irish Exhibition of 1888, held in Olympia, London, had proved inappropriate for explicitly promoting Irish independence or critiquing the English government, and Hart was to find the American press a more congenial environment for airing her support for Home Rule.

A rather different benevolent craftworkers’ enterprise is the subject of Vivienne Richmond’s chapter. The Girls’ Friendly Society’s ‘Central Needlework Depôt’, active in Britain from the 1880s to the 1940s, sought to provide ‘invalid’ as well as single, poor, or blind women with skilled training via correspondence courses and paid employment in ‘useful, interesting, and remunerative handicrafts’. Tapping into the contemporary crafts revival, the Society also targeted élite forms of patronage and courted royal approval. However, Richmond is able to draw upon a rich array of sources from the Society’s archive, including material fragments of workers’ stitching, which suggests that the Depôt had a radical impact upon the day-to-day lives of those it helped. Although the women were almost certainly poorly paid, special dispensations were made which ensured that all work was compensated, regardless of its condition. Local branches ‘adopted’ disabled workers, providing them with food parcels, equipment, and visits from other members, thereby helping to connect them to social and support networks within their communities. Furthermore, correspondence between the Society’s knitters and stitchers and their employers provides touching testimony to the emotional and therapeutic value of craft. In 1933, for example, a woman who had had to exchange her artificial leg for crutches wrote in to say that her work had ‘been such a help in ever so many ways’ during her recent ‘worrying time’ (p. 170). Richmond points out that, in spite of its disadvantages, the Depôt would have compared favourably to other contemporary schemes for disabled workers, which were typically based upon maximising profit from non-skilled occupations. In choosing to privilege relief from ‘the monotony of a sick bed, the weary sense of helplessness, of dependence upon others’ through pride and pleasure in handicraft, as one promotional leaflet put it, the Depôt may not have been economically sustainable over the long term, but its impact on workers’ welfare during this period was profoundly emancipatory (p. 168).

Finally, the major themes of the collection are tied together beautifully in Alla Myzelev’s paper, which focuses on the Guild of All Arts, a successful co-operative which sustained a group of craftworkers in Scarborough, Ontario in the wake of the Depression. Established as a progressive, profit-sharing venture in 1932 by socialists Herbert and Rosa Clark, the Guild produced textiles, metalwork, sculpture, ceramics and furniture using local materials, and also sold a variety of native handicrafts in its two retail outlets, thereby ‘disseminating an eclectic version of the Canadian cultural identity’ (p. 200). In contrast to some earlier 20th-century craft collectives, such as C. R. Ashbee’s Guild of Handicrafts, the Clarks’ Guild was attuned to modern fashion cycles and the importance of the middle- and lower-middle-class market for amateur handicrafts. One of its most successful products was the ‘Guildcraft Loom’ for making handmade fabric, designed collaboratively by weavers, woodworkers and metalsmiths, to complement the Guild’s other ranges of artisanal textiles and haberdashery. In selling these goods in department stores across the country, offering complementary craft workshops, and promoting the cutting-edge clothing designs which could be produced in their fabrics, the Guild helped change the associations of its craft ‘from grandmother’s necessity to a contemporary, creative pursuit’ (p. 205). In the following decades, as the community was drawn closer into urban Toronto, the Clarks continually adapted the scheme to ensure its survival, running a tourist resort and hotel decorated with Guild crafts and antiques; designing and building a garden suburb on their estate; and later becoming involved in architectural salvage and preservation. In this way ‘commerce and nostalgia were combined’ (p. 197).
Overall, the essays in this collection are impressive in the depth of their primary research, in the range of interdisciplinary perspectives each scholar brings to his or her research, and in the efforts made to reconnect underrepresented or marginalised communities with wider narratives in the history of craft, collecting and consumption. Enhanced by the thoughtful use of illustrations drawn from archives and museum collections, each chapter will surely be of interest both to specialists and to newcomers in the field. The book is a worthy addition to the global history of material culture.

Notes


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