

2015

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Nicholas Meehan

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Nicholas Meehan

Craft in Modernity

March 13, 2015

Jonathon Kahn

Lisa Brawley

Abstract

Since the industrial revolution, the craftsman has occupied an increasingly precarious position in society. The once obvious and natural role of craft is threatened. Craft production sits in uneasy tension with forces of modernity, practicality, industry, economy, and reproduction. These changing tides have instigated shifts in the actual and ideological identity of the craftspeople. Craftspeople have reformulated their conceptions of craft, and adjusted their physical practice in order to continue working. Several identities will be explored here, those of James Krenov, David Pye, Christopher Schwarz, and James Tolpin. These four individuals are fine furniture makers working in the latter half of the twentieth century and the early 2000s. These craftspeople are stating, in the face of obsolescence, that their work has something to offer modern society. Several of them explicitly position their work (both physical and ideological) as a critique of modernity. This essay will be an exploration of their claims to relevance, and underlying assumptions. It will examine how these craftspeople manipulate the history of craft to empower and justify new forms of “craftsmen.” It will consider the efficacy of these identities, whether or not these modern “craftsmen” can enact the change they envision. Finally, their various strengths and weaknesses will be synthesized in order to inform a productive future for craft.

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Author's Introduction

I have been involved with wood since an unusually young age. Early enough that my memories are clouded as much by childhood as they are by sawdust. Under the watchful eye of my mother (and she under the watchful eye of my Grandfather), I spearheaded the construction of countless wooden swords. By the time I realized that this was woodworking, I was already invested, planning and scheming new weapon designs.

Even later I came to understand that this practice of woodworking was not unique to my Grandfather's shop, it was in fact something people did for a living. I remember going into a "Woodcraft" store, a specialty store for fine woodworkers, and being absolutely stunned that such a store existed. It demonstrated that there was a whole world of woodworking, and a tantalizing array of products to sustain it. This realization coincided nicely with the mad High-School rush to determine one's future in time for college admissions. Though, as you may have guessed, I chose to attend Vassar instead of enrolling in a woodworking school, this moment's urgency prompted me to seek out apprenticeships and delve into woodworking.

I fairly quickly realized that the particular woodworking I was interested in falls under a loose category of "furniture making." Furniture making happens on a scale large enough to seem substantial, unlike carving or wood-turning, and small enough that it wasn't daunting. Of course, it also coincided nicely with the scale of the tools I inherited from my Grandfather.

My grandfather formed the first myth of the craftsman in my eyes. He passed away when I was young, but his physical absence only heightened his mythological power. He existed as a stock of stories of technical skill and austere sensibility. He was the man who could fix anything,

who built his upholstery and furniture repair business from the ground, and trained everyone working there. He mixed his own finishes, esoteric concoctions that even his best employees could not deconstruct. Other than these stories, I was left with a veritable mountain of his artifacts: tools whose meaning I can still not decipher, bits of wood which to him were worth saving and so they are to me, countless bottles and jars of finishing chemicals which I fear to open lest they truly contain “mercury,” as the faded scotch tape reads.

I suspect that many of us have a mythological craftsman, a relative like my grandfather who is understood through a dusty, reverent haze. The more I have worked with wood, the more I have found myself identifying with this figure of the craftsman. It is hard to say exactly who “the craftsman” is to me, partly my grandfather, partly a timeless myth, and partly an agglomeration of the working craftspeople I have met and read about. When I refer to the “mythological craftsman” later in this essay, this is what I am referring to. The mythological craftsman is both close to us, shaping our understanding of working craftspeople, and truly timeless. One of the authors treated here reaches back to Hephaestus, Greek god of fire and craftsmen, and while Hephaestus does not come to my mind when thinking of craft, his divine and ancient associations are indelibly wrought in the figure of the craftsman. As I have come closer, or at least become more familiar with the craftsman in all of its iterations, I have begun to question this myth’s power.

First, I am bothered by the constant trope, even in my writing, to present the craftsman as a vignette. The craftsman always appears in nostalgic settings, a relic of some past world. I wonder, if the craftsman is something lost, some nostalgic and beautiful past, who are all these people I am working for? What are they doing, and why? Do they believe themselves modern

incarnations of the craftsman, and if so, are they doing so because they dislike modernity? Are they live-in-a-shack-in-the-woods types?

What this also called into question for me is whether engaging in woodworking is meaningful for those outside of its practice. Is woodworking revered only because of a peculiar nostalgia for the hand-made that runs counter to modernity, or is it possible to conceive of woodworking as fitting firmly within modernity, and engaging with it, and perhaps even attempting to improve it?

In and around these questions of nostalgia, I have also come to question the constitutive elements of the ideal of the “craftsman.” If we agree that this term has some sort of power, where does this power come from? What are the social assumptions underlying our reverence for the craftsman, and what is at stake in unpacking these assumptions? A more complicated understanding of the craftsman would have implications for working craftspeople, but it might also reveal our assumptions about other forms of work in modernity. Why is physical labor with wood considered so noble, while academic writing is not? Why do we assume craftsmanship creates these timeless characters, while office work is alienating and dehumanizing?

I was recently told that due to my practice in woodworking, I might be the only person in the room who could claim to possess true “experience.” Now, sitting, in a room full of accomplished academics, this seemed to me a bit absurd. Why is the ability to attach pieces of wood together more “experiential” than academic work? Is there no history to writing, to reading, to questioning? Where is this border, and why do we believe it is there?

Returning to the living craftsman, what does craft look like if we remove its ideological associations? was James Krenov, who we will soon meet, just an old man making useless

furniture, or was he making furniture that has value outside of these nostalgic vignettes, and actually provides something unique to society? How should craft be practiced if it is to do more than provide safe havens for craftspeople? If there is good to be enacted through the practice of craftsmanship, as many seem to believe, how will this good be transmitted to the larger society? Is this good contained in the physical crafted objects, or merely in the ideology of the craftsperson?

In the past few years, I have worked formally and informally with several practicing furniture makers, and become acquainted with many more. I fully intend to work as a furniture maker after graduation. When and how do I declare myself a craftsman, and who has power to speak for or against my declaration? Ultimately, what would it mean to be a craftsman in the modern world, and how can I engage with this identity in a way that I find meaningful?

Craft as a Key Word

“Craft” exists within the conceptual spectrum of craft-craftsman-craftsmanship. Craft is a term that describes the qualities of certain practices, and an umbrella under which particular activities are understood and justified. While folding napkins might be referred to as “a craft,” it is not “craft,” a category of activities defined primarily by historical connotations. Usually these activities are now or have been a sort of work, a vocation or trade.

Before the advent of the industrial revolution everything used by man was made by hand craft methods as a matter of course. The best things were pervaded by a quality which we call craftsmanship, showing mastery of technique and embodying fitness for purpose, trueness to material, and beauty of form. Craftsmanship was both a method and a quality, the quality being essential, the method incidental, because the methods and tools had changed in the past and were to change again.¹

Often things described as crafts were once ubiquitous and necessary, but are now engaged in as a hobby or vocation. Some began as trades, were once vocations, and now exist only as avocations: hobbies. Basket-making, for instance, was once a necessary part of daily life. Baskets were made in small quantities by non-specified individuals. However, in time baskets come to be mass-produced in factories. The non-factory “basket maker,” is now a specialist, a craftsperson, making baskets in a different, older way due because this way is still held to be better. These baskets demonstrate craftsmanship. Perhaps for a time the passionate, vocational basket-maker-craftsman can sustain a business of niche basket-making due to a common understanding that crafted baskets are superior. However, even if there is little common interest in hand-made baskets, the basket-maker can still justify their actions as the preservation of a craft. Basket-making is then an avocation, a hobby, but one that is seen as wholesome and noble due to its historical roots.

¹ Schaefer, Herwin. "The Metamorphosis of the Craftsman." *The Journal of Modern Craft* 6.1 (2013): 266.

This same quality that makes certain activities craft can also be used to describe the identity of a type of worker, the “craftsman.” The craftsman either works in a way that is craftsman-like, or works at a practice, like basket-making, that is understood to be craft. In this way, surgeons and computer technicians can be described as craftsmen, not because these activities are crafts, but because they work in a way that displays craftsmanship. The craftsman is understood to be engaged, skilled, and often rigorously trained. It is generally assumed that they care about what they are doing: one who works for a living and nothing more is rarely understood to be a craftsman. The craftsman is working for some goal, often to attain the highest expression of technique. The identity of the “craftsman” is complicated when one works at a “craft” but may not do it well. If one makes poor quality baskets, despite care, attention, and training, is one a craftsman? This basket-maker’s colleagues may assert that the poor basket-maker is not a craftsman, since “craftsman” carries inherent implications of quality.

The “craftsman” is quite obviously a gendered category, obscuring and devaluing the work of female crafts workers. The term “craftsperson,” in comparison, describes a person who works at craft, but does not carry the same implications of quality. Reverence is reserved for the craftsman, not the craftswoman or craftsperson. In this essay, “craftsman” will be used preferentially to refer to the “mythological craftsman,” while “craftsperson” will be used preferentially when speaking about living workers in craft.

The craftsman produces a type of work characterized by “craftsmanship:” a soundness that can be aesthetic, functional, or structural. Craftsmanship is almost always understood as a positive attribute. However, “there is to this day no agreement about what constitutes craftsmanship; nor is there any about what is not craftsmanship, and that is perhaps still more

significant.”² Here we begin to see that while these definitions aspire to technicality, they are “historical or social terms, not technical ones.”³

During the Arts and Crafts movement, John Ruskin, English art and social critic, defined craft and craftsmanship based on imagination and creative freedom.⁴ Industrial work was a force that sought to constrain the freedom of the worker by restricting their ability to create. A successful crafted product was one that showed the human process of creation, without the regulation of process and product that alienated workers. This definition of craft is still held by many practitioners, whose products often have a rustic, or nostalgic feeling. Ruskin saw perfection as inhuman, and therefore prized roughness. His writings start a tradition in which craft is opposed to industrialization, mechanization, and repetition. By exclusion then, craft comes to be understood as inherently small scale, with few machines, in small quantity.

This definition is at odds with a later definition employed by craft workers in a thoroughly industrialist era. By the middle the 20th century, industry is not resented for stifling creativity but for producing objects of insufficient quality.⁵ This new conception of industry’s ills will be described in detail in relation to David Pye’s work. In summary, Pye and his contemporaries believe that craft produces aesthetic diversity rarely seen in industrially produced furniture. Crafted objects carry a desirable aesthetic aura that is not impossible, but very rare in mass-produced furniture. Craft, then, represents sphere of production in which the quality of the object is paramount, not its marketability or price. Workers in craft have accepted that they cannot

² David Pye. *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, 122

³ Pye, 126

⁴ Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America*, 4

⁵ Pye, 23

compete monetarily with the hyper-efficient world of mass production and regulation, they must instead strive for perfection of product. While craft is still small scale and machine-averse, these qualities are now prized for their unique ability to foster excellence, not roughness.

Craftsmanship has also become exorbitantly expensive, since it must avoid economies of scale and efficiency of process. “The rule is, as always was, that the very best quality is extremely expensive by comparison with things of ordinary quality.”⁶ Crafted objects become elite: the hand-crafted table, due to its tremendous cost, must appeal to those who can afford it. This is the “craft” evoked by fine furniture makers, not basket-weavers.

In more recent conceptions, craft also carries connotations of environmental sustainability. It has experienced a resurgence in the twee world of Brooklynism and Etsy. Objects made in this craft ideology are prized for being unique, elusive, and rare. They are creatively charged like Ruskin’s craft, deriving quality out of a close maker-object relationship. These makers appropriate the nostalgic appeal of craft, but do so in highly non-traditional ways. The hand-stitched leather phone case may be prized for traditional techniques, but it is not a traditional object. This world of craft is known and occasionally mocked for its use of terms like “artisanal,” “handmade,” or “crafted” in novel ways: the “artisanal pickle.”

There are people who say they would like to see the last of craftsmanship because, as they conceive of it, it is essentially backward-looking and opposed to the new technology which the world must now depend on. For these people craftsmanship is at best an affair of hobbies in garden sheds; just as for them art is an affair of things in galleries.

There are many people who see craftsmanship as the source of a valuable ingredient of civilization. There are also people who tend to believe that craftsmanship has a deep spiritual value.⁷

⁶ Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, 133

⁷ Pye, 84

Even when there is no market for a craft, there are individuals willing to argue for its “preservation.” Some argue that even if the basket itself is superfluous, the craft of basketmaking has an inherent value. Others dispute the notion that craft should be preserved for the sake of it; the basket-maker who makes useless baskets is just self-indulgent.

This conflict is related to craft’s central claims to practicality. There are many activities with which self-indulgence would be perfectly excusable. However, until very recently there have been few examples of craft that did not have an immediately understandable purpose. The craftsman is understood to exist for a reason, and if this reason ceases to be practical, the craftsman must assert a new reason, or cease to exist. “If the craftsman of today is producing not only useless but for the most part bad useless objects, is he then really a craftsman?”⁸ In other words, “unless he can show by performance that he is either a true artist, or a craftsman in the old sense, his salvation and his future lie in his recognition that what he is doing is of a private nature and of a personal value to him alone. The value of his work lies solely in *his* enjoyment of using his hands, an activity from which he may benefit mentally and emotionally.”⁹

Asserting craft’s importance has been increasingly difficult in the industrial age. New technologies, new tools, have emerged. While they are powerful, they come from the world of industry, and the machine is widely understood as the enemy of craft. Additionally, due to the possibility of more efficient and accurate production, historical tools that were once ubiquitous and necessary become increasingly outdated. Those who wish to embody the ideological position of the craftsperson must carefully tread the line between two modes of production. A craftsperson who strays too far towards machinery may find themselves stripped of their claims

⁸ Herwin Schaefer, “The Metamorphosis of the Craftsman,” *College Art Journal* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1958), 267

⁹ Schaefer, 273

to craftsmanship. Still, practitioners who wish to employ historical techniques must justify their actions, and as practicality ebbs away, their justification becomes increasingly ideological. They are at risk of falling prey to accusations of self-indulgence, violating their claims to practical craftsmanship.

At the outer reaches of this spectrum are crafts that exist only to demonstrate an alternative mode of production. These are the craftsman considered here, intentionally residing on the border of craft and obsolescence. For these individuals, the requisite practicality of craft is no longer in the production of a physical object, but the demonstration of an alternative world. Performing craftsmanship in alternative, nostalgic modes speaks against the totalitarian and colonial imposition of technology, industry, and modernity.¹⁰ However, as we will see, while all of these conceptions of craft posit an alternative world, only some are capable of broadcasting this world to the public. If we believe that craft has something to offer modernity, it is important to examine the alternative worlds these authors suggest, and to critique their ability to effectively enact these worlds.

¹⁰ “One way forward-by no means the only one, no doubt, but the one which will be briefly explored here-is to consider the [Arts and Crafts] movement as embodying an *alternative* modernity, which coexisted alongside competing and complementary modernities, none of which, it should be emphasized, represented the essence of modernity, its definitive and consummate expression” - Tom Crook, “Craft and the Dialogics of Modernity: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Late-Victorian and Edwardian England.” *The Journal of modern Craft*, 2.1 (2009), 19

The Hand-Tool Woodworkers

James Krenov, David Pye, Christopher Schwarz, and Jim Tolpin, could be characterized as “Hand-tool Woodworkers.” This category exists within the broader umbrella of furniture makers, and the even larger category of craftspeople. They make furniture using techniques that rely as much as possible on “hand tools.” There are many possible ways to categorize the worlds of craft. One could categorize by type of object produced, material, location, tradition, price, etc. In this case, we are exploring people who work primarily in wood, making objects of furniture (except for David Pye, who carved bowls).

Within spheres of craft a great deal of distinction is made based on choice of technique, and a lot of this distinction is not always observable to an outsider. However, due to certain conceptions of the nature of “craftsmanship,” two craftspeople could make identical pieces using different techniques, and these pieces would be regarded with different meaning as crafted objects. The ideological meaning of technique is central to many modern woodworkers practice of furniture making. They would suggest that one makes pieces that draw out of physical technique, not vice versa. The piece is conceived through the lens of technique, it is designed by the woodworker with its construction in mind. This is why the category of Hand tool Woodworker is significant here, while in other practices methodology would not be as important for categorization.

It is foolish to attempt to exhaustively define the category of “hand tool,” as one will soon find themselves inundated by an infinite amount of wishy washy in-between tools. However, there are some broad sweeps that can help narrow the category. Hand tools are usually

understood to be driven only by the human body. The power drill, though held in the hand, is not a hand tool in this sense. Hand tools rely on a relatively small amount of jiggling, the operator must assure that they cut as intended. Most tools understood as “hand tools” in the sense that it is used here are historical tools, that have been used in various forms for hundreds of years. The hand plane is an excellent example, as is the hand saw. There are newly invented hand tools that do not fit within this ideological “Hand-tool” category, like the ratchet, or the socket wrench.

It is also important to realize that very few woodworkers work without any hand tools, and even less work without any machine tools. All but the most insane hand tool zealots use machines to complete the rough preliminary work, and all but the most gear-headed machine users employ chisels and hand saws occasionally.

A furniture maker’s decision to focus on hand tools is not to be taken lightly. It is, first and foremost, not a pragmatic decision. Hand tools are surprisingly expensive, and require lots of time spent sharpening and tuning. They often work slower than their mechanical counterparts, and they require a fair amount of physical exertion for it. The furniture maker who uses hand tools must either charge more, or earn less per hour for his pieces.

This is why the Hand-tool Woodworkers were selected. The reasons to choose this life differ from one woodworker to another, as we will soon see. However, they are all united by a sort of ideological deviance. They choose to rely on antiquated, difficult technology because of its ideological implications. They are speaking against the claims of technology and industry. The “Hand Tool Woodworkers” pass over new tools that offer ease and efficiency, and in doing so enact a critique of these tools, and the world they represent. They are suggesting not only that hand tools produce better physical products, but that they represent something better than

machine tools. They suggest that craftspeople, and those that believe in craft, should aspire to something more lofty than ease and efficiency. The majority of the woodworking community, even within circles as small as “fine-furniture makers” relies more on machine assistance than the individuals discussed herein. This is why this cross-section of the woodworking community was chosen for a dissection of craft: they are thinking and acting intentionally for an ideological purpose under the heading of craft.

Additionally, all of these woodworkers have written books. The woodworking book is a peculiar thing, but it is not new: the tradition goes as far back as Andre Ruobo in the 1770s. They follow several consistent trends. The author is both the interpreter, and the subject of interpretation: they discuss their own work and techniques in the text. The books discuss both the technical aspects of the authors’ craft (which tool to use for what, how to use them), and the ideological aspects. Often these two go hand in hand, an argument that is particularly useful when considering the Hand-tool Woodworkers. A choice of technique can only be understood as an ideological decision, representing more than the absolute function of the tool and wood.¹¹ The indications of quality in a finished piece can be achieved in various ways, but some of them carry moral implications that others do not. Some are considered honest, others lazy.

The existence of these texts often comes as a surprise to those unfamiliar to the practice of woodworking, especially texts like James Krenov’s *The Cabinetmaker’s Notebook*, which is 90% beautiful prose and ideological rambling, and 10% technical instruction. One can imagine several explanations for why these texts exist, and why a woodworker would take the time to compose and publish them.

¹¹ “If the machine was responsible for the decline in human and aesthetic values, then, so the argument went, it follows that a rejection of the machine, in some degree or other, could arrest this process.” - Lionel Lambourne, *Utopian Craftsmen: The Arts and Crafts Movement from the Cotswolds to Chicago*, 4

One reason that comes to mind is that the woodworking text can stand in for the tradition of apprenticeships in a world with less woodworkers. It allows eager beginners to get their bearings in a dangerous and complicated craft even if they are geographically distant from any master woodworkers. This would be especially true in the Americas, where the tradition of apprenticeships was less powerful than in Europe. However, while this certainly explains modern treatises (Christopher Schwarz explicitly states the preservation of antiquated techniques as one of his motivators), it doesn't explain Andre Ruobo in the 1770s.

It was mentioned earlier that manipulations of the craftsman identity can be motivated by a desire for social recognition. This provides another explanation for the woodworker's text; by fully explaining their motivations and methods, woodworkers can valorize their work to a larger audience. This is especially important if a woodworker can only produce a finished piece once a month, or once every few months. Spreading one's name, photos of one's work, and describing a desirable ideology can afford one a variety of new opportunities. Woodworkers who are most widely known are those who write books. And, of course, writing is a source of income in and of itself. Book sales give one opportunities to write for woodworking magazines, supplementing the woodworker's meager earnings.

Above all, I believe these texts represent the authors' desire to contribute to the dialog of craft. These individuals are obviously ideologically motivated, as evidenced by their choice to employ hand tools. Their work, and their writings are a form of embodied social critique, a choice to live a certain way that goes against society's norms in order to enact change. Writing carries these norms farther than the woodworker is usually capable of.

It would be presumptuous to suggest that these texts are primary sources for “craftsmanship.” Craftsmanship is larger than this tiny segment of craft workers, perhaps even larger than craft. Still, the Hand-tool Woodworkers’ unique speaking position makes them a useful lens through which to view the various ways the “craftsman” identity has been molded and manipulated. They are active social critics manipulating the practice of craft in order to rebel against certain parts of modernity that they disagree with. They are enacting alternative identities, in the hopes that the world will recognize its importance. The ideologies presented within are remarkably diverse, illustrating that while craft is a universally powerful concept, its meanings can be highly varied. Even with the insular group of Hand-tool Woodworkers there is different constitutive meaning. These writings will be analyzed with an eye to their attempts at social reform, and how notions of craft are employed to make these reforms more poignant.

A Practice

I would like to propose that Hand-tool Woodworking can be best understood through Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of a "practice." The roots of this notion run back to Greek antiquity. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle puts forth the idea that "every sort of expert knowledge and every inquiry, and similarly every action or undertaking, seems to seek some good."¹² He suggests that actions always seem to aspire to something larger than themselves. Bridle-making is dedicated to the greater scheme of "horsemanship." Once establishing this, *Ethics* extrapolates further: there is probably an ultimate end to which all actions aspire. This is human good.

Of course, "human good" is a very large and vacuous concept. Aristotle specifies by suggesting that various human goods are contingent on one's "function." People who participate in activities like flute-playing, or sculpting, who have a "characteristic function or activity," seem to do "good" *through* their function. Their functions provide the ends and means; the flute player has an understanding of what makes a great flute player, and also understands the necessary path to achieve these goals. Having established the connection between function and good, Aristotle posits that "a human being's function" is "a kind of life, and this life as being activity of soul and actions accompanied by reason... If all this is so, the human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with excellence (and if there are more excellences than one, on accordance with the best and most complete)."¹³

¹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, L1, 95

¹³ Aristotle, L2, 102

Approximately 2400 years later, Alasdair MacIntyre returns to Aristotle's concept of virtue. The huge expanse of time since Aristotle's writing has muddied the waters of human good, there are a tremendous amount of competing traditions that all put forth some ultimate human goal. In order to unify and organize discourses about human virtue, MacIntyre puts forth the concept of a practice.

A practice is any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.¹⁴

Simple enough. In order to guide the ignorant layperson, he provides quite a few helpful pointers. First, not all things are practices in this sense. Bricklaying is not a practice according to MacIntyre, but architecture is. Planting turnips is not, but farming is. A practice must be sufficiently complex, and "socially established." It is possible to imagine a world in which brick laying is a practice, but in this world there would have to be a great deal of discourse around brick laying. Practices need to have histories and traditions out of which their practitioners understand themselves, and they need to be, to some extent, self-aware as practices. At the time of MacIntyre's writing, there is no community of earnest "brick-layers" that understands itself as such, and therefore, brick laying is merely the subset of a larger, self-aware practice.

The "goods internal" to practices are not the most immediate material or spiritual rewards for participation. Winning \$1000 in a chess tournament does not make \$1000 a good internal to chess. However, the ability to analyze and manipulate complex situations is an internal good. Goods internal to a practice tend to be good for the whole community of practitioners once discovered; better cricket technique may momentarily propel one participant to victory, but

¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 182

eventually it will be assimilated into the wider body of practitioners and become common technique.

The most crucial point of this argument is that goods internal to practices can only be identified and recognized through the experience of participating in the practice in question.¹⁵ One outside of the practice of expert chess can not imagine the rewards of being a expert chess player, because the rewards are so intimately tied to the experience.

To return to our original purpose, I again propose that Hand-tool Woodworking, a clunky definition for whatever it is that Krenov, Pye, Schwarz, and Tolpin are involved with, is a practice. These writers and workers are engaged in a socially established human activity, attempting to achieve the appropriate, established standards of excellence. Craftsmanship is one of this practice's internal goods. Craftsmanship is a favorable disposition gleaned through participation in Hand-tool Woodworking that is only vaguely understood by those outside of the practice. Naturally, like "analytical skill" for chess, it is not exclusive to the practice of Hand-tool Woodworking, though one could argue that the Craftsmanship understood by Hand-tool Woodworkers is different from that understood by basket-weavers.

The texts written by these craftspeople are intended to help orient beginners in the practice of Hand-tool Woodworking. "To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of [ones] own performance as judged by them."¹⁶ This practice is not immutable. In fact, these authors at times show radically different conceptions of the meaning of Hand-tool Woodworking. "Practices, of course, as I have just noticed, have a history... Thus the standards are not themselves immune from criticism, but nonetheless we

¹⁵ MacIntyre, 182

¹⁶ MacIntyre, 190

cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far.”¹⁷ To enter into woodworking under the instruction of these authors, is to receive some tantalizing taste of the goods inherent to the practice, and to recognize that these goods are constantly in contention across time and between practitioners.

The very disagreements between people ostensibly engaged with the same practice is one of the constitutive characteristics of any human endeavor. “A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.”¹⁸ A practice without internal negotiation is dead, stagnant. It is not able to endure changing seas.

This work, as well as the works considered herein, can thus be seen as attempts to narrativize the practice of Hand-tool Woodworking. “Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions.”¹⁹ The form of the narrative recognizes that the constitutive meanings of practices may change while still maintaining a continuous thread. The writings of Krenov and others are attempts to place themselves within the larger narrative of woodworking, and “sustain relationships to the past-and to the future-as well as in the present.”²⁰ Here, I intend to explore the differences between these authors conceptions of woodworking. I am especially interested in how they orient themselves in relation to craft’s history. As mentioned earlier, the material conditions and social place of craft are in flux. These authors are all attempting to assert continuity with the historical traditions of

¹⁷ MacIntyre, 190

¹⁸ MacIntyre, 222

¹⁹ MacIntyre, 191

²⁰ MacIntyre, 221

woodworking, and therefore appropriate its meaning as a practice, but simultaneously they must reinterpret this practice to make it viable in a changing world. They are performing the identity of the “craftsman” at the same time as they reimagine it.

Modern craftspeople are faced with the real possibility that very soon their practice will cease to exist. Some understand themselves as the last generation of craftspeople. This is to say that they are under no illusion about the socio-economic position of craft, they recognize that it is disappearing. Still, they believe that despite its obsolescence, craft has something to offer to society. There is some good internal to craft that justifies its preservation. While craft production will never be materially necessary in the way it once was, the goods internal to craft may be more necessary than ever. These authors’ texts show various ways of transmitting and communicating this internal good to the greater public. These craftspeople are attempting to demonstrate their significance to a society that increasingly considers them irrelevant.

Krenov's Last Cabinet

James Krenov was born on October 31, 1920, in the village of Uelen, Siberia. His early life, for our purposes, can be best described as a series of new locations: China, Alaska, and Sweden. Krenov's parents were teachers and globetrotters, a trait he inherited in adulthood. However, among Krenov's various and multinational identities is one that came to be profoundly influential: the identity of a craftsman. More specifically, he was a woodworker, a maker of fine furniture. Krenov purportedly worked wood for his entire conscious life; he writes that to entertain himself in Alaska he carved small toys out of driftwood. As an adolescent he became interested in boatbuilding, a practice he later cites as influential to his furniture designs. As a young adult Krenov underwent formal training in Sweden under the famous designer Carl Malmsten. During his two years under Malmsten, he learned the intricacies of furniture design and construction.

This trade soon became his profession, at which he worked, in solitary basement workshops across the world, until his death in 2009.²¹ His style is distinct, and widely emulated today. It is best encapsulated in the form of the cabinet, which when made by Krenov is a very different animal from the kitchen cabinet that shares its name. Krenovian cabinets are fairly small wooden boxes, usually less than two feet wide and three feet tall. They almost always have swinging doors on the front, which Krenov meticulously selected to give a certain impression of beauty. Occasionally they were highly figured rare wood, but more often they contained some subtle feature that Krenov found striking: an unusual hint of color or turn of grain. The rest of the

²¹ Though he was eventually forced to give up woodworking entirely, Krenov made small hand-planes until he was almost completely blind. In *The Cabinetmaker's Notebook* he relates that he stopped only because he suspected that he would injure himself. His wife writes that Krenov passed away while cradling a small piece of poplar.

cabinet was “composed” to highlight this feature. Frequently the cabinets were raised off the ground by a delicate stand, or occasionally mounted on a wall.

When Krenov died, he left behind one of these cabinets, which had been commissioned by his student, David Finck. Krenov knew he would be unable to finish this cabinet, and asked Finck to complete it. One learns, from Finck’s account of the situation, that this was not a decision he took lightly. When faced with this proposition, he “received input from three prominent museum conservators and several woodworking friends whom I admire and respect. Advice ran from ‘wrap it up in a blanket, put it in a closet and make a reproduction to enjoy,’ to ‘put the unfinished cabinet on a pedestal with the unfinished drawer parts inside’ to, ‘finish the piece, as Jim requested.’”²² To Finck and others in the world of fine woodworking, Krenov was one of the most influential woodworkers of the 20th century. In his life and legacy he birthed several woodworking schools, each a cult of personality dedicated to his ideology.²³ His books, *The Cabinetmaker’s Notebook*, *The Fine Art of Cabinetmaking*, and *The Impractical Cabinetmaker*, are required reading for any aspiring woodworker. The “Last Cabinet,” then, was a moment in which Finck was asked to interpret this legacy.

A designer might consider “Krenov’s Last Cabinet” an accent piece, something to fill a blank space of wall. Judging by the photographs of Krenov’s cabinets, a homeowner might presume they were intended as beautiful storage space for one’s pottery collection. Due to their inherently limited use and exorbitantly high price, they are implicitly status objects. However for Krenov and his devotees, these cabinets represented something much greater than the sum of their aesthetic of functional qualities. They were physical representations of a set of ideals that

²² David Finck, “James Krenov’s Last Cabinet.” *David Finck: Woodworker*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Jan. 2015.

²³ College of the Redwoods Fine Furniture School, Inside Passage School of Woodworking

Krenov felt were absolutely necessary and dangerously scarce. His pieces of furniture “grow out of an idea, and a feeling. About how some things are meant to last, wear well, age gracefully- while others are not.”²⁴ They were answers to a materialistic, throw away culture, objects intended to endure the rigors of time and remain both functional and beautiful. They offer salve to “the sheer exhaustion of skipping along the surface, buying, buying,” with aesthetic qualities inspiring their owners to “slow down, look around, and listen”^{25 26}

They are objects manifest of a profound, intimate connection between the woodworker and the workpiece, “and *how* they are doing it. I mean they are doing it in the most intimate detailed sense; the relationship between the wood and the tools that they use, between their feelings, their intuition, and their dreams.”²⁷ “The Last Cabinet,” then, is less an object characterized by its aesthetic diversity (though Krenov would maintain that this type of work can have qualities that industrial work can not), but a testament to an ideological scheme. The qualities that physically differentiate it from other work are only the surface. The sound construction,, the small details made by Krenov’s hand tools, and the careful selection of wood are merely testimony to the intended meaning of the piece: an homage to the mythological identity of the Craftsman.

Krenov understood himself to be working during a time of change, when production techniques for furniture were shifting. Places like Malmsten’s school were disappearing, places

²⁴ James Krenov, *A Cabinetmaker’s Notebook*, 127

²⁵ Krenov, 74

²⁶ “He will buy, wear, and throw away, and then go and look for the next and the next. Now suppose we make this same citizen a table out of solid doussie wood that is oil-finished and will last for fifty years or more and grow beautiful as it is being used; that will give of a quality sound when a glass or cup is placed on it. This table costs no more than do any two factory-made tables. What? the person in question says, ‘It’s outrageous!’ Of late I have been trying to ask the question as firmly as I can , ‘Outrageous on what basis; in relation to what?’” - Krenov, 24

²⁷ Krenov, 8

in which skilled craftsmen all worked together to create common products. The production of every day furniture was increasingly dominated by industry, and in this environment there was little demand for skill.²⁸ Krenov's notions of craftsmanship are challenged by this change; it is difficult to understand oneself in the traditional role of a craftsman, one who is dedicated to creating useful objects, if you are economically unable to make useful objects in a viable scale. Krenov's life work, both in wood and writing, can be understood as a response to this perceived change. He sought to reinterpret the role of the craftsman, but also to maintain the social and societal qualities that he saw as intricately tied to craftsmanship.

Krenov perceives this loss in his daily life, and expresses it through his writing. When describing a visit to a small, personal lumberyard, he laments that he could only buy one plank of a log, "sorry ever after that I couldn't buy the whole log, because soon it was gone; this was the last of it, ever. And the last of the old-fashioned one-man companies, the romantic attitudes, the impractical approach; everything."²⁹³⁰ At moments it seems that he truly believes that he and his compatriots are the last of a dying generation of romantic woodworkers.

In Krenov's writing, the imagined world of traditional craft has a very unassuming importance. This is the timeless world of the "village blacksmith and potter, who did their work completely naturally. in those days the reasons were obvious; people looked directly, and saw,

²⁸ This timeline will be thoroughly fleshed out, and corroborated, in a following chapter on the work of David Pye.

²⁹ Krenov, *A Cabinetmaker's Notebook*, 9

³⁰ Impracticality: In his writing, Krenov emphasizes the "impracticality" of his work. This is meant in a cordial self-deprecating way, and it reflects his understanding that there are more economically and socially viable ways to produce furniture. Nevertheless, this "impractical" approach is what Krenov loves, and what he hopes his clients will love also. It is, as he describes, romantic and human, so is the furniture produced. As we will see, this impracticality empowers and strengthens Krenov's philosophy. Also, it is critical to recognize that this impracticality *supports* his practical endeavor: to produce objects that are of a different quality than industrial woodworking. The "impractical" historical techniques result in an alternative practicality.

even before they comprehended.”³¹ The “craftsman,” embodied here in the blacksmith or potter did not need to assert their own importance. While Krenov clearly admires the simplicity and humility of these craftspeople’s lives, he is not wholly envious. In another passage he describes the historic craftsman as more of a “tool” than an “instrument,” unable to master the “final element of discovery,” because this was not part of their training.

Still, he believes that he is not alone in yearning for the “obvious and proper place that much of this had in our lives.”³² He recognizes a trend (perhaps an ever-present one) in which people, and woodworkers, are “becoming more and more curious about them. Old tools, old houses, old anything - we are looking for something lost.”³³³⁴ Though he does not make the point explicitly, this nostalgic yearning presumably draws out of modern malaise. Krenov points out several modern characteristics that define this malaise, but the most significant for him is shallow engagement. Materialism results in individuals consuming objects without engaging with them, buying and throwing away without reflection. Gratification for the woodworker is knowing “the things that I do mean something to someone, somewhere, in these truly strange and hurried times.”³⁵

However, it is important to note that while Krenov is nostalgic for an older world of craft, he does not advocate a return to traditional methods or sensibilities. He recognizes that the modern worker will never fill the historic role of earlier craftsmen; “We can’t quite return to the

³¹ Krenov, 79

³² Krenov, 115

³³ Krenov, 30

³⁴ Those looking for a modern example of yearning for “old anything” should consider stores like Restoration Hardware, or Anthropologie.

³⁵ Krenov, 108

obvious and proper place that much of this [craftsmanship] had in our lives. Attempts to go back are usually doomed to fail for several reasons - different materials, new and different skills, a different life.”³⁶ This is critically important in our understanding of Krenov’s work.

Like the other woodworkers discussed in this essay, Krenov is to some degree a social critic. His ethos is reactionary, and seeks to enact social change through his physical and intellectual work. However, it is his willingness to accommodate the identity of the craftsman to the modern world that makes his ideology so enticing. Krenov draws upon the historic identity of the craftsman to gain recognition for a new craftsmanship that is suited to a modern world. He appropriates the practicality of “the village blacksmith and potter,” but does so to argue for the ideological importance of modern craft. This craftsman, in Krenov’s opinion, has the power to enact change, but cannot do so if they are living in the past. In this way, Krenov goes beyond lamenting the fall of craft, and succeeds in outlining an future for aspiring woodworkers.

As I mentioned earlier, this formulation of craft proved wildly influential, spawning various schools and innumerable adherents. David Finck is only one of the a whole generation of woodworkers who structured their work around Krenov’s philosophy. The basic points will be outlined here, both to illustrate Krenov’s manipulation of the idea of the “craftsman,” and to provide a groundwork through which later craftsmen can be understood.

I mentioned earlier that Krenov’s philosophy is heavily based on “practicality,” which is an amusing sentiment considering he explicitly refers to himself as an “impractical cabinetmaker.” Krenov requires the craftsman to maintain social and economic viability. The craftsman must offer something to society and be accepted as useful. This tension plays out in his

³⁶ Krenov, 115

disposition towards machinery. Krenov considers himself a Hand-tool Woodworker. He suggests that “our machines are treacherous. And i don’t just mean they bite; they do. But the real treachery is more elusive. On the one hand they help the cabinetmaker greatly; on the other, they corrupt him.”³⁷ A distrust of machinery is central to any good woodworking text. This should not come as much of a shock, considering that craft has functioned in the public mind as the opposition to industry at least since the Arts and Crafts Movement. If industry is the realm of the machine, craft is the realm of the hand. In woodworkers’ philosophies the machine is more powerful than its function, it represents nearly all that craft tries to oppose. Of course, the machine’s function as an extremely powerful tool of effort and time reduction cannot be ignored, even by Krenov.

As such, Krenov does not eschew machines entirely. A “visitor the other day the other day expressed surprise over these machines-they collided with his impression of the romantic craftsman. He was from England, and I think he brought a bit of a William Morris attitude with him.”³⁸ While recognizing the harmful influence of machine tools, Krenov is too reasonable to give them up. “Somewhere between these two ways is a sensitive balance which our craftsman must try to find before it is too late.”³⁹ While Krenov employs machinery far less than his peers, and infinitely less than industrial furniture factories, he is forced by his own practical sensibilities to recognize their place in his shop. Without machines he would be truly “impractical,” to the point where his impracticality mean nothing, since he would never be able to produce work.

³⁷ Krenov, 66

³⁸ Krenov, 66

³⁹ Krenov, 66

Practicality also has a part in Krenov's assertion that he is not an artist. The passages in *The Cabinetmaker's Notebook* about the difference between "the craftsman" and "the artist" are some of Krenov's most explicit discussions of the meaning of craft. He seems to be struggling with an outside perception of being an artist, and "doing artist's work," a position he sees as distinctly different from craftsman's work. When asked how it feels "to be an artist," he replies that seeing his work as art is "naive, because I spend long hours moving these heavy planks all alone, working in the machine room where the dust is so thick I can hardly see the walls, and the noise is pounding."⁴⁰

It is quite telling that Krenov's reply to the accusation of artistry is that his work is physically taxing. It hints at a masculinity complex that underlies many craft philosophies: I am not an artist, I work with my hands! I lift heavy things! I am a man! However, to other craft theorists, Krenov could be the epitome of the artist. The philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement painted the "workshop," as a "place of integration in all respects: a place of social solidarity and unity, *and* the production of objects and wares necessary for life." Krenov worked completely alone, shunning apprentices and helpers in favor of solitary toil. His "workshop" is more reminiscent of "the studio," "the home of the introspective, narcissistic 'genius.'"⁴¹ Here we see a moment in which Krenov's "craftsman" is distinctly at odds with the historical craftsman from which he claims lineage. This is yet another example of intentional manipulation of the meaning of craft in order to suit modern sensibilities. As we will see, Krenov's choice to

⁴⁰ Krenov, 12

⁴¹ Tom Crook, "Craft and the Dialogics of Modernity: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Late-Victorian and Edwardian England." *The Journal of modern Craft*, 2.1 (2009), 27

work alone was not merely preference, it fed into the role he perceived as the future of craft work.

While Krenov disputed accusations of artistry, he was at peace with his individualistic, narcissistic work style. He worked alone due to his self described “vain and impractical” belief that “for better or for worse, nobody else’s hand, eye, or intuition will quite coincide with mine. Which does not mean mine are better: it’s just that people are different” (Krenov, 43). He would, however, argue that this individualism was not merely self-serving. Beyond being what Krenov liked, this attitude was what made him capable of producing work of the best quality. In this way, while personal satisfaction is paramount, it still draws from a sense of social responsibility.

Krenov, among others like David Pye, pioneered the notion that the craftspeople is not in competition with industry. Competition puts the inherently “impractical” sensibilities of Krenov’s craftsman under strain. If, in the industrial age, the craftsperson cannot produce objects of absolute necessity, their work had to provide something that industry could not. The craftsman’s “sole reason for being-his *raison d’être*, is that he offers people something that industry and other more rational means of production cannot give them.”⁴²

This “something else” is ultimately the goal Krenov’s work aspires to. He describes it in remarkably sensuous terms:

“Nothing is wrong. here I am, here is my work- and someone is waiting for the fruits of these fleeting hours. My contentment is bound by the whitewashed walls of my little cellar shop, but the stacks of long-sought woods with their mild colors and elusive smells, by the planked ceiling through which I hear the quick footsteps of a child-and yet it is boundless, my joy. The cabinet is taking shape. Someone is waiting for it. With a bit of luck, it will be liked, given continuity in a life of its own. Hands will caress this shimmery surface, a thumb will discover the edge which I am rounding. An edge rounded with my plane. An edge cut rounded, but not sandpapered-a sensitive finger will understand its living imperfections and be pleased at the traces left by sharp steel on

⁴² Krenov, 74

hardwood. Through the years this edge will be polished, change tone, gleam in mellowness. Yet always it will bear the marks of my favorite tool.”⁴³

This is the goal that justifies and motivates all of Krenov’s philosophy. This is the key to unifying all of the conflicting parts of “the craftsman” identity. While Krenov’s craftsman does not have the obvious practicality of “the blacksmith or potter,” he or she does have practicality through offering a necessary aesthetic and ideological influence. Their practicality is through impracticality, illustrating an alternative world that others can learn from.

To represent this ideology in a piece of work, Krenov is willing to sacrifice and manipulate other tenets of historical craftsmanship. If machine tools threaten to erase this vision, then efficiency and economy can be sacrificed. If the craftsman must work alone to produce these objects, then it is reasonable to renounce “the workshop” in favor of “the studio.” If the craftsman now behaves like “the artist,” this is justified by the social responsibility of providing a vision of craftsmanship.

This new identity, expressed in Krenov’s writing and teaching, gave purpose to a generation of craftsmen who lived and worked in a world dominated by industry. These men and women “worked modestly, more for enjoyment and fulfillment than profit” They were “in general, at odds with the overt commercialism that characterizes much of craft, be it the competitiveness of the avant-garde scene or the banality of the handicraft market.”⁴⁴ Krenov’s ideology provided a craftsmanly identity that these individuals could embody, giving both personal and social meaning to their work. It allows them to pursue highly satisfying, individualistic work, while maintaining a sense of social responsibility and outside purpose.

⁴³ Krenov, 32

⁴⁴ Craig McArt, Introduction to *A Cabinetmaker’s Notebook*, 4

This is the identity at stake in “Krenov’s Last Cabinet.” Finck is left with the obligation and privilege of interpreting Krenov’s identity through his most prized object: the cabinet. The options Finck considers are telling of the conflicts in Krenov’s “craftsman.” He could “wrap it up in a blanket, put it in a closet and make a reproduction to enjoy.” This option is interesting, partly because it seems nonsensical. Maybe this is just Finck attempting to avoid the situation altogether, because doing anything with this workpiece is too emotionally significant. While Finck wants the cabinet, he cannot handle the responsibility of touching Krenov’s work. Or, he could “put the unfinished cabinet on a pedestal with the unfinished drawer parts inside.” This would possibly reveal something of Krenov’s work process, immortalizing his care as a worker, and the related qualities of craftsmanship. However, this would fetishize Krenov and the identity of the craftsman without the justification of practicality. Displaying the cabinet’s parts would make an impression about the woodworker’s attention to detail, but it would do so in a way that appeared crass and self-satisfying. Eventually these options prove unsatisfactory. Finck knows that the only outcome Krenov would have approved of is to finish the piece, and treat it like a piece of furniture. This is the only way that it can fulfill its intended role, quietly signifying a practical yet radical ideology.

David Pye and the Workmanship of Risk

David Pye was Krenov's contemporary. Though it is unclear whether or not Pye was familiar with Krenov's work, Krenov was certainly familiar with Pye's. *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* is cited several times in *The Cabinetmaker's Notebook*, as it is in numerous texts dealing with the role of craft in society. Pye was academically trained to be an architect of wooden buildings, and in early adulthood pursued Naval architecture. He worked for twenty six years at the Royal College of Art in London, eleven of these years as a Professor of Furniture Design.

His life in the academic sphere has done him well; *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* is one of the most intellectually sound texts I have read on any subject. Pye is able to carefully and rigorously define terms that have been nebulous for centuries. It is also important that Pye is also a practicing woodworker. "Unlike most other intellectuals who write about art, design, and craft, [Pye] was himself a maker of things. He not only made things, he always made things, he thought from the perspective of the workman, and he took great pleasure in the activity of making."⁴⁵ It is likely this double role as academic and "craftsman" (a term Pye will soon contest) that motivates his text. He is fed up both with the common and the academic treatment of "craft," and is in a unique position to remedy the situation.

Pye is motivated by a desire to clear up the inconsistencies in the public's conception of craftsmanship. He believes that this confusion is rooted in the Arts and Crafts movement, and the movements long and convoluted legacy. In the latter part of his work Pye provides a extremely

⁴⁵ John Kelsey, Introduction to *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, Pye, 13

thorough critique of Ruskin's writing, which he believes to be crude and ill-conceived. However, beyond being a poor theorist, Ruskin is responsible for muddying the waters of "craftsmanship" for all who follow him.

Because of this the [Arts and Crafts] movement left behind it confusion of thought about workmanship: or, in its terms, craftsmanship. There is to this day no agreement about what constitutes craftsmanship; nor is there any about what is not craftsmanship, and that is perhaps still more significant. One has known craftsmen whose ideas have been colored by the Arts and Crafts movement, to imply that not-craftsmanship is:

- Imprecise workmanship (i.e. rough or free workmanship)
- and/or (always)
- Precise workmanship
 - Unskilful work
 - Working to another man's design: or (I think) a traditional design, unless of a musical instrument
 - Using machine tools (if they are power driven)
 - Producing a series of more than perhaps six things of the same design
 - Not making the whole job from start to finish⁴⁶

David Pye likes things to be clear and ordered, and as such this commonly understood definition of "craftsmanship" is extremely bothersome. He points out that "with rare exceptions, you cannot tell, simply by looking at the work, whether the last four criteria apply or not: whether it is the work of a 'craftsman' or not. Consequently these last four ideas have fostered the extraordinary notion that craftsmanship should not be judged by its results like all other workmanship, and that the craftsman may properly take the standpoint 'I am holier than thou'"⁴⁷ This accusation could easily apply to Krenov, whose esoteric, mystical persona provides gloss for otherwise mundane techniques.

Primarily, Pye is bothered by the lack of technicality with which we describe "craft," or "craftsmanly" works. He argues that "'Handicraft' and 'Hand-made' are historical or social terms, not technical ones. Their ordinary usage nowadays seems to

⁴⁶ Pye, 122

⁴⁷ Pye, 124

refer to workmanship of any kind which could have been found before the industrial revolution.”⁴⁸ This makes it extremely difficult to describe distinctions in how various goods are made, and how these production techniques relate to the finished product. All the words in our conceptual lexicon have been manipulated by “too many cranks and too many people trying to grab higher wages.”⁴⁹

The manipulation of terms is inevitable, especially if they are terms that garner certain individuals more social and financial success. It is no wonder that hacks describe themselves as “craftsmen,” especially if the wider public is unable to recognize the signs of quality in their work.

In hopes of a more rigorous understanding of these qualities, Pye introduces the concept of workmanship. This is divided into two categories: the workmanship of risk, and the workmanship of certainty. The workmanship is able to stand in for the word craftsmanship, though it has a much stricter definition:

If I must ascribe a meaning to the word craftsmanship, I shall say as a first approximation that it means simply workmanship using any kind of technique or apparatus, in which the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgment, dexterity and care which the maker exercises as he works. The essential idea is that the quality of the result is continually at risk during the process of making; and so I shall call this kind of workmanship ‘the workmanship of risk’: an uncouth phrase, but at least descriptive.”⁵⁰

To reiterate, workmanship of risk is a style of work in which the quality of the result depends on the ability of the worker. For example, a wood carver with a gouge has many opportunities to accidentally gouge and thereby ruin a workpiece. This is a situation with high risk of failure, and therefore success requires a high level of skill. This

⁴⁸ Pye, 26

⁴⁹ Pye, 53

⁵⁰ Pye, 20

is also true of a dentist holding a drill, where success in drilling requires a steady hand and calm composure.

As Pye intended, this definition echoes certain aspects of our common definition of “craftsmanship,” but eschews the esoteric, mythical qualities. This is the style of work responsible for “all the works of men which have been most admired since the beginning of history ... the last three or four generations only excepted.”⁵¹ Victorian furniture, ancient stone carvings, ancient jewelry, all of these things are products of risky, unregulated, high skilled labor.

However, this is partly because until recently, there were few other options. Techniques for reducing risk were not well developed. “In the workmanship of risk, in all trades, the course of historical development has usually been to increase the workman’s power to regulate, and the standard of regulation aimed at has tended to get higher.”⁵² The industrial revolution, in Pye’s terms, represents a boom in regulatory techniques, and the beginning of the age of “workmanship of certainty.”

Workmanship of certainty is the counterpart to workmanship or risk. It is a style of work in which the quality of the end product has little to do with the actions of the worker, and the end product is completely anticipated before production begins. For example, the goal of a paper clip factory is to ensure that the paper clips will turn out exactly as planned, whether the worker is a skilled paper-clipper or not.

While workmanship of certainty is often associated with factory work, and workmanship or risk is often associated with craft, the two never truly exist in isolation.

⁵¹ Pye, 20

⁵² Pye, 53

Any style of work will contain moments of risk, and moments of certainty. When Krenov incorporated machines into his work, he was to employing workmanship of certainty to complete tedious tasks with high precision. On the other hand, even the most highly regulated factory must be set up, and calibrated with the workmanship or risk.

Additionally, while workmanship of risk has traditionally been associated with work of the highest quality, “in many contexts it is an utter waste of time. It can produce things of the worst imaginable quality. It is often expensive. From time to time it had doubtless been practiced effectively by people of the utmost depravity.”⁵³ In this sense Pye avoids the common suggestion that craftsmanship is responsible for excellent products, while industry makes “termite barf” (a term used by one of our other woodworkers, Christopher Schwarz).

His critique differs from others presented here in that it makes very little consideration of the worker. Pye’s entire system is based on the object, the product. In his mind the quality of the object can be excellent whether it is produced by a factory or an artisan. Still, to consider production in this way seems to gloss over the long history of exploitation and dissatisfaction in industrial work. This dissatisfaction is actually what motivates much of the writing on craft, especially the Arts and Crafts movement that Pye dismisses so quickly.

I do not believe that this is because Pye is heartless. I can only imagine that he is sympathetic to the plight of the industrial worker, but wishes to create a definition of the workmanship of certainty that does not require exploitation and alienation. While Pye is

⁵³ Pye, 23

working to promote the future of craft, much of his argument relies on rehabilitating the image of industry. Industry may have done evil, but the workmanship of certainty that defines industry is not inherently evil. In his vocabulary, the industrial worker has been regulated, much like the machines they operate, to reduce the risk in manufacturing. As many have experienced, this regulation amounts to a loss of agency and satisfaction in one's work. However, regulation of human beings is not essential to the workmanship of certainty as Pye presents it, it is merely an unfortunate correlation. Pye wishes to create a craft that is more than salvation for the worker, so that it may offer something to the greater public. He avoids demonizing industry so as to avoid the straw-man logic of worker-salvation, in order to make room for more novel arguments.

While Pye believes that both styles of workmanship are capable of producing work of the best quality, he does maintain the commonly held notion that workmanship of risk (craftsmanship) produces objects with a quality that cannot be found elsewhere. This quality, in his lexicon, is "aesthetic diversity." This can mean various things, from the rough texture of a carved surface, to the smooth contours of a hand-made chair.

In a rare moment of whimsy, Pye likens craft work to the diversity of the natural environment. The unexpected, beautiful qualities that can now only be found in the workmanship of risk are reminiscent of the unexpected beauty of nature. "If the appearance of the environment matters a little to us all, as to some of us it matters overwhelmingly, then it seems reasonable to suppose it may be good for us to import into

the unnatural environment we have made some of the quality of unmonotonous unexpectedness that our race was born to live with.”⁵⁴

Pye’s vision for the future of craft is based on the idea that craft can provide an alternative to the “monotony” of the manufactured environment. It can not replace industry, but it can be the “salt.” Like Krenov, Pye believed that workmanship of risk must aspire to the absolute highest levels of quality in order to ensure its survival. If craftspeople are only capable or interested in making middle quality objects, they are competing with industry and thereby redundant. Instead they must produce something different, and this difference must be worth the exorbitant price tag.

Like all the woodworkers considered here, Pye puts this future in the hands of amateurs. “The continuance of our culture is going to depend more and more on the true amateur, for he alone will be proof against amateurishness. What matters in workmanship is not long experience, but to have one’s heart in the job and to insist on the extreme of professionalism.”⁵⁵ The amateur is capable of this because they are not obligated to survive off their work, and thus can spend the time to make pieces of exceptional quality. It should be noted that Pye does anticipate these amateurs selling their work in the market, and therefore making them available to the public.

There is a moment in *The Art and Nature of Workmanship* in which Pye pokes fun at the propensity for woodworkers to assume “striking attitudes. The attitude of protest I have mentioned already. Another one is the attitude of sturdy independence and solemn purpose (no truck with part-time workers: they are all amateurs; social value; produce

⁵⁴ Pye, 58

⁵⁵ Pye, 136

things of real use to the community); another is the attitude of holier-than-thou (no truck with machinery; no truck with industry; horny-handed sons of toil; simple life, ect.).

Another is the snob attitude, learnt from the ‘fine’ artists (we who practice the fine crafts are not as other craftsmen are).”⁵⁶ However, as a woodworker, Pye is sympathetic, he understands the powerful and pervasive influence of craft’s historical manipulations.

“These are ridiculous nonsense by now, but who has not felt sympathy with them, all but the last, at one time or another? For nostalgia is always in wait for us.”⁵⁷ Still, it is Pye’s refusal to accept these antiquated paradigms of nostalgic craft that makes his analysis so powerful.

By avoiding traditional mores of craft thought, he is able to create an identity for the craftsman that is truly pragmatic. Unlike other models presented here, it does not require faith. Pye’s craftsman, or “workman,” has a distinct goal (producing objects of the highest quality) and a distinct purpose (to provide aesthetic diversity in an increasingly monotonous material culture). It would be a tall order to ask everyone to accept Pye’s understanding of craft. There are many working craftspeople who are motivated by the mythical craftsman, and hopefully many clients who feel similarly. Nevertheless, Pye is successful at creating a future for craft beyond nostalgia, positing a realistic, pragmatic meaning for the workmanship of risk.

⁵⁶ Pye, 137

⁵⁷ Pye, 137

Christopher Schwarz and Jim Tolpin

“The mere act of owning real tools and having the power to use them is a radical and rare idea that can change the world around us and - if we are persistent - preserve the craft.”⁵⁸

This passage is from Christopher Schwarz’s very recent work, *The Anarchist’s Tool Chest*. The work was published in 2010 by Schwarz’s own publishing house, Lost Art Press (a telling name to say the least, whose implications will be clear soon enough). It seems fitting to frame a reading of Schwarz’s text around this notion of “preserving the craft” for several reasons. First, and most obvious, is that Schwarz himself identifies preservation as his motive for writing. In this book and others, he has essentially devoted his life to this project. Unless we believe him to be a madman, a judgement I will leave in the hands of the reader, there must be something very important about “the craft.”

Secondly, this statement and its implications are critical to our dialogical understanding of craft through time, and craft in American culture. Schwarz is attempting, like Krenov, to carve out a niche for himself and others, to repurpose and rebrand “craft.” What is interesting about this is that when one examines Schwarz’s craft, it is immediately clear that it is vastly different from any craft previously described. In fact, it is missing almost all of the central tenets that woodworkers like Krenov and Pye wax over. As we will see, Krenov and Pye’s emphasis on supreme quality is missing, along with their assertion that the woodworker must maintain some place in the market. However, in contemporary craft Schwarz is not alone. A very similar ethos is

⁵⁸ Christopher Schwarz, *The Anarchist’s Tool Chest*, 11

described by Jim Tolpin in *The New Traditional Woodworker*, albeit without the explicitly political tone.

Before addressing these tantalizing permutations of craft, a brief summary of Schwarz's work is in order. Schwarz introduces himself as a writer. Despite a fairly blue collar upbringing, he expected his college education to distance him from the world of manual labor. Sadly, copy editing proved unsatisfying for Schwarz's soul. He gradually returned to the sphere of wood and tools that his father inhabited, but does so through familiar channels. For twenty odd years he worked for the Popular Woodworking Magazine as editor and contributor. As Schwarz himself tells it, after these twenty years he was finally ready to take a leap of faith into the unsalaried, unsupported life of a woodworker. However, reading between the lines one notices that this leap of faith coincides with the opening of Lost Art Press, so perhaps he is not as independent and daring as he would like us to believe.

This story is presented in the text of *The Anarchist's Tool Chest* as something of a transformation narrative. Through his own increased devotion to "the craft," Schwarz seeks to garner recognition for the importance of traditional skills. Like Krenov, Schwarz sees himself in a historical dialog of changing craft. But while Krenov is nostalgic, Schwarz is downright pessimistic. *The Anarchist Tool Chest* argues that the "craft of woodworking was cut down by the aftermath of World War II. The global reconstruction in Europe and the mass mechanization required to do it quickly girdled the bole of the woodworking craft. Chisels were put away. Moulding planes were burned. Saws were allowed to rust."⁵⁹ Standardization is the prime enemy here, subsuming the worker-work relationship.

⁵⁹ Schwarz, 455

Of course, this shift is a simplification of several processes that Schwarz identifies as culprits for modern malaise. One is mechanization, which is responsible here and elsewhere for separating people from their material, and contributing to a simplification of processes that marginalizes skill. The second is bureaucracy. In practices other than woodworking, Schwarz chafes at the fact that “all large institutions - governments, corporations, churches - have divided up the tasks we do in our jobs to the point where these institutions do wasteful, dehumanizing and stupid things.”⁶⁰ What all of this amounts to is a loss of agency. And to embody this loss, as any good woodworker would, Schwarz points to “chipboard crap.” The degradation of material culture stands in for the degradation of culture as a whole. From here one would expect Schwarz to argue for the creation of better, sturdier, more beautiful products.

Surprisingly, he does not. Instead he proposes a notion that any object created by a craftsman is inherently superior to that created by a factory. To clarify, he is not saying necessarily that craftspeople make better products, but that the act of creation is extremely important. To create is in Schwarz’s lexicon an act of rebellion, an assertion of the creator’s agency in the face of bureaucracy. This is the what he hopes to instill in his readers: the desire and ability to create. Interestingly, in order to do this Schwarz does not point to the immediate history of fine woodworkers like Krenov, nor the more popular blue collar history of garage do-it-yourselfers. He instead reaches back all the way to antiquity. The majority, some 396 pages, of *The Anarchist’s Tool Chest* is a treatise on 18th century European joinery. Schwarz lists and describes the 40 odd tools that every artisan would have relied on, and advice on how to pick

⁶⁰ Schwarz, 24

ones that will work. Then there are small exercises that employ these tools, culminating with a project of creating one's own "*Anarchist Tool Chest*."

After enlightening the new woodworker, Schwarz forks over the purpose of his text: the fate of "the craft," and then in a larger sense society as a whole, is dependent on the amateur woodworker picking up his saw and getting to work. "It is our duty as amateurs to pick up the mantle of the craft of woodworking from the professionals, who have been carrying this heavy burden for us for generation after generation. It is our turn to preserve the design, joinery and finishing skills that are now being transferred to CNC machinery."⁶¹ The issue here is that Schwarz never actually describes how emulating a 18th century craftsman in one's garage can save the world. He is confident and firm on two points, that the world is morally bankrupt due to institutionalization and mechanization, and that "the craft" should be maintained, but the connection between these is never fully fleshed out.

Other woodworkers have provided various solutions to this problem. For Krenov, the connection has something to do with the social relationship between the craftsperson and the client. The craftsperson is responsible for creating the best possible work because someone will appreciate it. The client will, through the influence of the physical piece, come to understand something of Krenov's moral teachings, and hopefully "slow down, look around, and listen."⁶² This relationship with the outside world is missing in Schwarz's creation of "the craft." At moments Schwarz even explicitly denies any desire to commune with non-craftspeople. He states that the craftsmanly dream is to "run in social and economic circles made up of other

⁶¹ Schwarz, 458

⁶² Krenov, 74

individual artisans.”⁶³ This inward focus can be seen implicitly in the proscribed beginner projects. They are all tools, or boxes in which to house tools. There are no small gifts, no trinkets, no simple furniture projects. All tools. Nothing that would fit in on Etsy, never mind a fine furniture gallery. This makes it difficult to imagine Schwarz’s work having much impact on the world. If one is making things, but those things are only useful or even recognizable to woodworkers, how can this “change the world?”

Schwarz also avoids David Pye’s emphasis on the quality of the completed object. Pye, discussed earlier, was adamant that craft work could produce objects of a different, unique quality. Pye is careful to point out that this crafted quality is not wholly superior, in fact often craft produces work of the worst quality. Still, it is different, and in a world of homogeneity this aesthetic diversity is key to our well-being. The closest Schwarz comes to this assertion is asserting that “the objects that we build are a slap in the face of the chipboard crap that is forced down our throats at every turn.”⁶⁴ However, he does not specify what exactly makes his work better than “chipboard crap.” He could say that they are sturdier, built to stand the test of time. Or that they are better conceived, the products of a vision not tainted by economic motivations. Or, like Pye, he could suggest that they are simply beautiful because of their crafted nature.

He does none of these things, leaving one to wonder again, what is “the craft?” What can it do if it cannot make objects of superior quality, or even cultivate a relationship with non-craftsmen? Returning all the way back to the Arts and Crafts movement provides another alternative for the function of craft. The Arts and Crafts movement’s utopian vision begins with salvation of the worker. “Social disruption grew not from hunger or pride alone but the fact that

⁶⁴ Schwarz, 10

men ‘have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread, and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure.’”⁶⁵ To save the worker is to save society’s morality.

Here Schwarz appears highly conflicted. He begins his text with a vignette of the modern woodworker descending in to his basement shop and merely holding his tools. He describes the comfort and tranquility he feels simply through their presence. But later in the text he asserts vehemently that he doesn’t “give a crap about personal self-actualization. I don’t care if you find peace in your smoothing plane. I don’t care if you find your power animal. What I care about is the craft of woodworking, which is closer to extinction than at any other time in the history of the human race.”⁶⁶ This is baffling. Schwarz is unwilling to argue for woodworking as worker salvation, despite the fact that his entire work is framed as a salvation narrative. He buries his personal narrative under a political one about craft and anarchy.

In order to help resolve this tension, it is important to consider Jim Tolpin’s work, *The New Traditional Woodworker*. Tolpin is completely willing to admit that Hand-tool Woodworking is a self-interested, self-fulfilling practice. His book is, like Schwarz’s, a treatise on how to use antiquated tools and techniques to make objects. However, instead of plotting an anarchist revolution, Tolpin is writing because he found that this type of work is what his students wanted. They “wanted to learn to make solid wood furniture and small scale furnishings for themselves in a modest-sized, home workshop.”⁶⁷ Woodworking using these antiquated techniques is “immersing oneself in a pleasurable avocation,” it is simply more fun than using machines.

⁶⁵ Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America*, 5

⁶⁶ Schwarz, 458

⁶⁷ Jim Tolpin, *The New Traditional Woodworker*, 6

This is at first glance very similar to Schwarz's conception of Anarchist craft. The practitioner makes objects in their free time, without any attempt at monetary gain. They do so using antiquated hand-powered techniques. However, the difference between Schwarz and Tolpin's vision can be encapsulated in the word "pleasure." Tolpin is speaking about his spirit animal. He has found something that brings him joy, and does not need to hide this joy under rhetoric of political action. If one is willing to ignore Schwarz's argument that "this isn't about self-actualization," it is immediately clear that he too is working for pleasure. Schwarz's craft, like Tolpin's, is only capable of producing personal salvation, with a smattering of wooden products on the side.

"Unless he can show by performance that he is either a true artist, or a craftsman in the old sense, his salvation and his future lie in his recognition that what he is doing is of a private nature and of a personal value to him alone. The value of his work lies solely in *his* enjoyment of using his hands, an activity from which he may benefit mentally and emotionally."⁶⁸ I believe that Schwarz's desire to politicize his actions, and make them about "preservation" actually echoes the craft's historical emphasis on pragmatism, self-sufficiency, and masculinity. Since Ruskin, "the craftsman ideal depended on a sense of the workman as the free, creative, and manly man, an ideal admirers saw embodied in Morris himself."⁶⁹ Schwarz's forefathers in this practice eschewed frill and ostentatiousness. Just as Krenov vehemently denied his artistic identity, Schwarz must deny his self-interest.

Activities primarily aimed at personal growth are often understood under the framework of a hobby. "Anarchist" woodworking is, as Tolpin admits, "an activity done regularly in one's

⁶⁸ Schaefer, 273

⁶⁹ Boris, 12

leisure time for pleasure.”⁷⁰ Perhaps the reader is unfazed by this suggestion, but I find it a bit peculiar, or at least worthy of analysis. Why would these men, and presumably women (though they are never explicitly mentioned by the authors) choose to spend their free time slaving over an activity that is ostensibly work? Woodworking is difficult, it is tedious, it is messy, and it requires tremendous investment of time and money to get any sort of satisfaction. So, what is it that makes woodworking desirable over other historically oriented leisure-time pursuits like hunting, hiking, or fishing? Or, if we agree that woodworking is pleasurable, why not engage with modern techniques that minimize labor and maximize quality?

Richard Sennett, in “*The Corrosion of Character*,” shares Schwarz’s pessimistic view of modern work. He argues that modern work cannot provide the moral grounding necessary for well-rounded life. The career path has degraded to the point that workers cannot rely on established standards, and instead must live in a world of shifting values and unstable footing.⁷¹ This all amounts to, in so many words, confusion and alienation. However, as Sennett argues, traditional crafts like woodworking offer moral grounding that is unavailable in most modern work. They are grounded in a tradition, stable in an unstable modern world.

Tolpin and Schwarz are insulating themselves within a practice that provides them with meaning. Woodworking allows for deep, consistent engagement, and has historical values that can be appropriated as the practitioner’s own. By performing an older form of work in the modern form of a hobby, Schwarz and Tolpin are able to assume the moral history of the craftsman.

⁷⁰ New Oxford American Dictionary definition of Hobby.

⁷¹ Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, 22

The choice to approximate the distant world of 18th century craft, as opposed to more recent techniques, is especially revealing. Modern woodworking techniques are able to provide everything that *New Traditional* techniques can, except for ideological insulation. In many cases modern tools and techniques make for better work, with less monetary investment, but presumably they are too reminiscent of mechanization, and “chipboard crap,” the imagined enemies of antique morality. *New Traditional*, or *Anarchist* woodworking is not only an escape from machines, but from “the machine.”

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that Schwarz’s work is an intentional critique of modernity. This is critical because if it were not, it would seem a bit rude to poke holes in his method of salvation. If he, like Tolpin, only wanted to make chests in his basement with hand tools, god bless. Sadly, though, Schwarz is evangelical, he wants to convert his readers to this particular world view, and I for one am not convinced by its ability to enact positive change.

As I mentioned earlier, Schwarz’s treatise has remarkable similarities with the Arts and Crafts movement. This is not particularly surprising, since they are both essentially the same endeavor: to change the world of work through a revitalization of the craft movement. They are also subject to many of the same failures, and Schwarz’s “anarchism” could benefit from the scrutiny of Arts and Crafts critics.

In *Arts and Labor*, Eileen Boris makes the argument that the Arts and Crafts movement was “forged by culture critics who never fully transcended the society they despised.”⁷² In particular, she suggests that Victorian tenets of masculinity, sexuality, and domesticity remain central to the Arts and Crafts movement despite its desire to escape them. For Schwarz, the prime

⁷² Boris, 192

conflict is with consumerism. His work is poised as an attack on consumption, despite the fact that it is little more than a shopping list. Schwarz painstakingly lists the tools that amateurs should acquire in order to succeed. The possibility for success lies primarily in the correct object. Correct technique, and hopefully good design, will just fall into place. Like Ruskin and Morris at the turn of the century, if *The Anarchist's Tool Chest* “assumed the tone of a moral crusade ... it was an idealism with a material face.”⁷³

Furthermore, both movements could be accused of essentializing and romanticizing a distant past, from a position of wealth and luxury. While Ruskin and Morris reimagine the medieval worker as a blissful peasant, Schwarz encourages woodworking without addressing the class differences that make this an option for him. Had Schwarz not spent most of his life as an editor and writer, he would be unable to fathom a life of austere craftsmanship because it would be economically impossible. If “aesthetic anarchism” is intended to remedy the world of work, then the world of work must only consist of white, upper middle class writers.

Finally, Schwarz and his spiritual predecessors fall short in their ability to engage with a larger public. This was mentioned earlier, in relation to James Krenov’s belief in the social relationship between craftsman and consumer. However, it cannot be emphasized enough because this is what eventually cripples Schwarz’s anarchism. Of the Arts and Crafts movement, Boris writes :

Arts and crafts could make a few people happier as producers, and even more as consumers, but could never affect the mass of workers. in its emphasis on individual satisfaction and unique results, the craftsman ideal actually reinforced status heirarchies, shifting responsibility away from employers to producers themselves, who were to counter industrial division of labor through their own love of true craftsmanship.⁷⁴

⁷³ Boris, 193

⁷⁴ Boris, 192

Not all of this is directly relates to Schwarz; he makes no argument for unique results. He also makes no provision for a “happy consumer,” his objects are not for sale. Nevertheless, the push of the argument is the same: these movements reliance on craft zealots proves encapsulating. By relinquishing his place in the market, Schwarz relinquishes the historical avenue through which craftsmanship has been shared. He implicitly restricts his audience to people already convinced by his argument: people who are willing to buy a \$40 book on 18th century woodworking techniques, and people who are willing to dedicate huge amounts of time to “the craft.” Schwarz succeeds only in reproducing the conclusion Eileen Boris drew in 1988 about the end of the Arts and Crafts Movement. “Put into practice, the vision of Ruskin and Morris lost its utopian power; as a vision, however, the craftsman ideal has retained an emancipatory potential for the individual, if not the society.”⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Boris, 193

Conclusion

“Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.”⁷⁶

Craft is a story. It is a constantly shifting constellation of ideological dispositions. It is performed, maintained, and manipulated by practitioners and devotees. As MacIntyre argued in *After Virtue*, the best way to understand a practice is through narrative. This work, as mentioned earlier, is an attempt to reconstruct the narratives that four Hand-tool Woodworkers tell about their craft. Their narratives are, as we saw, far from uniform. Each writer places themselves within the timeline of woodworking slightly differently.

In their writing, they are attempting to “sustain relationships to the past-and to the future-as well as in the present.”⁷⁷ They are declaring their allegiances with craftspeople who came before them, both real and imagined, and hoping to influence those who will come after. Part of this imagined past is the “mythological craftsman,” but there are also more tangible histories. Krenov sees the “village craftsman” in himself. Schwarz and Tolpin quite obviously appropriate the identity of the 18th century cabinetmaker. They declare allegiance in their writing, and maintain this connection in their physical practice. Everything from their choice of tools to their design of furniture are embodied negotiations with the history of craft.

The stories told by these workers can only be told alongside a story about the rise of industry. The change in production techniques, the rise of the “workmanship of certainty,” has had profound implications for the working craftsman. Indeed, each of these workers writings can be seen as attempts to mitigate the tension between historical craft and the “machine.”

⁷⁶ MacIntyre, 216

⁷⁷ MacIntyre, 221

Industry complicated woodworking on several fronts. The most sweeping change is industry's domination over all spheres of production. The overwhelming majority of objects are now produced through the workmanship of certainty. Without its once obvious place in the market, woodworking and woodworkers took on new meaning. A mode of production, as well as the style of the finished product, have "value [that] is relative to their time and circumstances. Regulation once had a meaning which it no longer has; while free workmanship begins to mean what it can never have meant before."

For James Krenov, and David Pye, woodworking in the time of industrial production is practiced in pursuit of utmost quality. "The productive branch [of craft] on the other hand is declining, and in the course of the next two or four generations it may well have become economically negligible as a source of useful products. But, though, after that, the workmanship of risk may never again provide our bread, it may yet provide our salt."⁷⁸ Alternatively, For Christopher Schwarz and Jim Tolpin, woodworking provides personal salvation, as well as demonstrating the possibility of alternative worlds. It is a radical demonstration of self-reliance, of independence from technological hegemony.

Industry also complicated woodworking through the introduction of radical new mechanical techniques. Machines, in the hands of the trained craftsman, have the power to drastically reduce toil and increase quality. However, while they offer help, they represent the industrial threat to craft. For early craft theorists, this tension amounted to a wholehearted rejection of the machine. The Arts and crafts movement argued that "if the machine was

⁷⁸ Pye, 132

responsible for the decline in human and aesthetic values, then, so the argument went, it follows that a rejection of the machine, in some degree or other, could arrest this process.”⁷⁹

For later woodworkers, those treated in this essay, such a bold rejection is no longer possible. If the 20th century craftsman wishes to produce in any sense of the word, they are forced to accommodate mechanical tools into their repertoire. Even our “anarchist” Christopher Schwarz, and our “New Traditional Woodworker” Jim Tolpin, admit that they use machines for the roughest stock dimensioning. Still, these workers are all careful to assert historicity and allegiance to past techniques. They are, after all, Hand-tool Woodworkers in the industrial epoch. Hand tools represent their continuous identity with the village woodworker, and the mythological craftsman.

All in all, the totalitarian claims of industry and technology suggest that the craftsman should no longer exist. They are superfluous, antiquated, nostalgic. Surprisingly, James Krenov, David Pye, Christopher Schwarz, and Jim Tolpin disagree. They believe that despite the rise of workmanship of certainty, the craftsperson still has something to offer society. The narrative of the craftsman is more than the mythological past, it is also carries a transformative vision of the future.

On one hand, craft is conceived of as “anti-modern,” as opposed to, and critical of, industrial modernity. In this way, it is also seen as backward-looking, nostalgic and anachronistic. On the other hand, its very critical posture towards industrial modernity is taken as evidence of its modernity, of a forward-looking, transformative ethos which seeks to foster change, innovation and reform.⁸⁰

Richard Sennett’s work, *The Craftsman*, attempts to mobilize the transformative power of “craftsmanship” in order critique modernity. Much of the way he understands craftsmanship

⁷⁹ Lambourne, *Utopian Craftsmen*, 4

⁸⁰ Crook, *Dialogics of Modernity*, 18

differs from the accounts of living woodworkers, but we can learn a great deal from these disagreements. The argument Sennett puts forth in *The Craftman* actually begins in one of his earlier works, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in New Capitalism*. Despite this nice uplifting title, Sennett is quite pessimistic about the “Personal Consequences of Work.” He argues that in modern capitalism there is no such thing as a career. One can no longer expect to spend their life building on a skill set and rising through the ranks of the work force. Instead, one must be prepared to bounce from job to job without consistency or comfort. This situation is especially damaging for those who leave college with a specialized degree. These unlucky saps might spend twenty years as electrical engineers before their “experience” proves less valuable than the fresh, up-to-date knowledge of recent graduates.⁸¹

Not only does this prove economically problematic for workers, it also poses moral hazards. The worker in new capitalism can no longer ground his or her morality in their work. Occupation is no longer a source of ethics, but instead a locus for fears of emasculation and impotence. There is no call for dedication, no accountability, and ultimately, no virtue. If MacIntyre were to make this argument, he would say that the majority of jobs are not practices, and therefore they have no internal goods through which participants can narrativize their lives.

Sennett’s argument functions by separating the practice of “craftsmanship” from its historical roots. This allows him to overlay craftsmanship on other types of work, and thereby instill meaning in a capitalist moral vacuum.

‘Craftsmanship’ may suggest a way of life that waned with the advent of the industrial society - but this is misleading. Craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake. Craftsmanship cuts a far wider swath than

⁸¹ Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, 22

skilled manual labor; it serves the computer programmer, the doctor, and the artist; parenting improves when it is practiced as a skilled craft, as does citizenship.⁸²

This separation of “craftsmanship” from craft is problematic. Sennett is persuasive in convincing the reader that practices like Hand-tool Woodworker are extremely rewarding to the worker. They are deep, engaged practices, that offer a personal narrative to the practitioner. However, implicit in Sennett’s use of “craftsmanship” is the suggestion that all modern work lacks these these qualities. And here I am unable to follow: is the writer without a history of their practice? Is the surgeon unable to claim deep engagement? Is the delivery driver unable to understand their work within some historical frame? Can the professional athlete, the computer programmer, not see themselves as noble agents? Why is it that Sennett can only see practice in craft? Personally, I would ascribe this logical turn to misguided malaise, which ultimately defeats the change Sennett envisions. By limiting practice to the craftsman, Sennett further alienates the people he wishes to save.

Returning to our woodworkers, Sennett’s stance speaks to the question of how craft can enact good upon society. The existence of modern furniture makers implies that they believe themselves doing something meaningful for the world, but how is this meaning transmitted, and what part of craft is meaningful? In separating “craftsmanship” from the “way of life that waned with the advent of the industrial society,” Sennett locates this good differently from how our woodworkers locate it.

He suggests that the good inherent to craftsmanship, its transformative power, can exist without any living craftspeople. The transformative power of craft exists in its idea alone, the idea of engagement, the idea of the mythological craftsman, the Hephaestus. The “Craftsman” in

⁸² Sennett, *Craftsman*, 9

the abstract. It is not the 18th century techniques, or any of the physical practice that Krenov and friends engage in.

This is a profoundly different understanding of craft than that of our modern woodworkers. The woodworkers are trying to do the very opposite, they are maintaining the 18th century techniques as much as possible, because they believe that this “way of life” is inseparable from the mythological craftsman. They cultivate this way of life in hand tools, and the insistence on quality in their work. Craftspeople’s insistence on embodiment reflects their belief that the good of craft can only be understood through engagement. The good can only be gleaned, and demonstrated, through physical work. Furthermore, this good is constituted partly by their radical nonconformity. The good in craft for Schwarz is mostly the demonstration of a historical world, one that flies in the face of corporate and industrial paradigms.

Without this belief, Sennett paves the way for the disappearance of living craftspeople. He makes possible a world in which the mythological craftsman is revered, while working craftspeople are ignored. If we, like Sennett, believe that craft has good to offer society, the consequences of his argument must be avoided at all costs. We must recognize craftsmanship as impossible without embodied craft.

As each of our Hand-tool Woodworkers suggested, this future of craft will be drastically different from that which has existed, and that which exists now. Already one can perceive changing values in practicing furniture shops. More modern shops tend to make small, salable products: cutting boards, beard combs, stools. They have become experts at a certain type of online marketing, expanding a limited local market through Facebook, Instagram, and Etsy.

On the show “Portlandia,” there is a segment in which a magazine features a furniture

maker for its August “Man Issue.” The interactions between characters reveal the still widespread fetishization of the hand-made, and the hand-makers.

Somebody that builds furniture could build your whole house for you, and then he could build all the furniture to go in the house, he could build the crib for the baby, and then he could even build our caskets for our funeral ahead of time, you know? I want the furniture guy. Of course he had a girlfriend, of course.⁸³

Craft has found its place within a new world of the “hipster,” twee identity. In this space, locally made products come to represent environmental sustainability, aesthetic novelty, and nostalgic mystique. The traditionally masculine ethic of craft is challenged, made so crass as to be merely amusing, not threatening. In *Portlandia*, the furniture maker “used to work in an office,” but now “he’s really embracing masculinity!” Nick Offerman, Hollywood actor and fine woodworker, demonstrates a similar caricature of masculinity. However, photographs of his employees reveal a community of sexually and racially diverse young woodworkers. Once the colonial masculinity hidden in the “craftsman” gives way, it will make room for new identities, hopefully infusing life into an often stagnant social world.

Sometimes this new world of craft is mocked for its topical frivolity, especially when it is associated with the Twee trends like the artisanal pickles. Still, craft’s new young practitioners are following in the footsteps of those that came before: performing an identity of alternative production, and in doing so critiquing the modern world for being inadequate. They will create their own ethic of craft, and in doing so redefine and reinterpret the various traditions that came before them. As it has with each new generation of workers, the historical power of craft will carry on with new ideological meaning.

There are people who say they would like to see the last of craftsmanship because, as the conceive of it, it is essentially backward-looking and opposed to the new technology

⁸³ *Portlandia*, *Soft Opening*, IFC Original Productions, Portland OR, February 8, 2013, Television.

which the world must now depend on. For these people craftsmanship is at best an affair of hobbies in garden sheds; just as for them art is an affair of things in galleries.

There are many people who see craftsmanship as the source of a valuable ingredient of civilization. There are also people who tend to believe that craftsmanship has a deep spiritual value.⁸⁴

Many of these authors point to the amateur as holding the future of craft. “Amateur, after all, means by derivation a man who does a job for the love of it rather than for money, and that happens also to be the definition, or at least the prerequisite, of a good workman.”⁸⁵ The amateur in this sense is different from the professional only in that they do not use woodworking as their sole source of income. This freedom from economic constraints allows the amateur to engage the work without worries of efficiency. Still, there is something to be said for economic dependence on craft, it creates a social relation that is difficult to maintain in solitude. Perhaps the place for the amateur is growing, especially the highly skilled amateur, but I believe there is still room for “professional” craftspeople to create work of quality and economy.

If either the amateur or the professional wish to practice craft to its utmost potential, there are many lessons to be gleaned from the Hand-tool Woodworkers. While craft production will never be necessary in the way it once was, the goods internal to craft may be more necessary than ever. These authors texts show various ways of transmitting and communicating this internal good to the greater public.

While the idea of craft, and the basic practice of craft is already demonstrative of alternative worlds, craft must strive to maintain contact with the outside world. Workers must not encapsulate themselves in nostalgia, and they must not relinquish their place in the capitalist market. They must avoid the pitfalls of Christopher Schwarz and the Arts and Crafts movement,

⁸⁴ Pye, 20

⁸⁵ Pye, 135

because while the encapsulated craftsperson can achieve personal salvation, they will never enact change upon the world. The demonstration of historicity is productive in arguing for possible alternative modernities, but it must not be all craft aspires to. “The crafts in their future role may yet fill the vacuum but only if craftsmen achieve some consciousness of what they are for, only if they will set themselves the very highest standards in workmanship, and only then if they attract the voluntary services of the best designers.”⁸⁶

Working individuals must strive to offer something more than the fetish of the hand-made. At some point the ostensibly “hand-made” object is merely kitsch. As David Pye and James Krenov argue, “There can be no reason for them to continue unless they produce only the best possible workmanship, free or regulated, allied to the best possible design: in other words, unless they produce only the very best quality.”⁸⁷ Not all workers will agree with this conception, Schwarz and Tolpin certainly would not. Still, I believe there must be more than the demonstration of craft for craft’s sake. Producing work of excellent quality is a noble goal for any endeavor, but especially so for craft. Exceptional quality provides access to a market, and recognition from society. Ultimately, however it shall be, craft must carry itself forward, not insulate itself in a comfortable past. As James Krenov suggested, in craft “there are things to be found, there is knowledge to be gained. The question is: How do you use that knowledge to go ahead, not just back?”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Pye, 138

⁸⁷ Pye, 132

⁸⁸ Krenov, 30

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