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Crafting Revivals?

An Investigation into the Craft Revival of the 1970's. Can Contemporary Comparisons be Drawn?

Andrea Peach

This paper originates from PhD research which I am currently undertaking on craft in the 1970s, a time which craft historians and theorists generally acknowledge as one of revival and reinvention of craft practice across Britain. Today we are experiencing what has also been described as a 'craft renaissance'. This paper considers whether the craft revival of the 1970s shares any parallel causal features with today. To do this, three areas will be explored: the role of the state, the relationship of craft to contemporary fine art, and the socio-economic climate of the period. Although the breadth of this subject precludes a comprehensive study here, it is hoped that some useful comparisons might be drawn here.

Craft in Britain flourished in the 1970s largely due to the activities of the Crafts Advisory Committee (CAC), now the Crafts Council, which was established in 1970. The CAC was a state-backed, central organisation charged specifically with shaping a new identity for Britain's crafts. Its remit included raising the professional status of crafts, and promoting the craftsman as 'artist'. The terminology used by the CAC to align the crafts with fine art was highly significant in shaping the identity and outcomes of craft production and consumption at this time.

The CAC facilitated and nurtured craft through the allocation of grants and loans, the commissioning and patronage of work, the organisation of exhibitions, publications and publicity, as well as the running of conservation projects and training. It was responsible for the creation of *Crafts* magazine (Fig. 1) in 1973, which is still in circulation. *Crafts* was visually exciting in comparison to other art magazines of the time, containing large colour photographs and profiles of makers involved with 'the new crafts' (Harrod, 1999: 373). Its editorial content was upbeat and underlined the relationship between the CAC and the nascent craft revival.

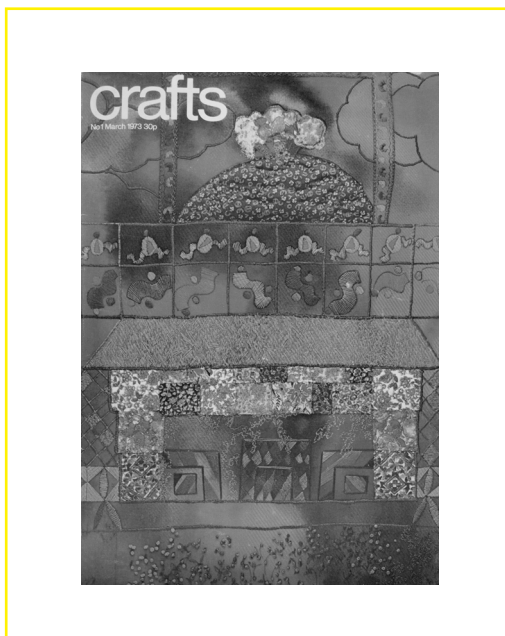
The CAC was noted for its national exhibitions, in particular *The Craftsman's Art* held in 1973 at the V&A Museum, which included 1200 objects from 440 makers from England,

Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. The exhibition had 56,000 visitors and provided an ideological focal point for the CAC and the 'new crafts' (Crafts Council, 1999: 9). The role of government in the promotion of crafts at this time was highlighted in the catalogue essay by James Noel White, Vice President of the World Crafts Council, who wrote: 'Some governments indeed recognise this [the crafts] as part of social and economic policy. Fortunately thanks to the Paymaster General, there are signs that we do too' (White, 1973:11).

It is evident that the CAC played a defining role in shaping and enabling the craft revival of the 1970s through its funding schemes, exhibitions and launch of a high profile magazine. As craft historian Tanya Harrod wrote: 'The 'new' era was, therefore, partly the result of a new institutions' propogandising activities' (Harrod, 1999: 370). However the CAC, with its desire to champion innovative and professional craft practice, could not hold back the wave of interest in both amateur and traditional craft embraced by many craft practioners at the time (Harrod, 1999: 403). Although the CAC played a crucial role in the 1970s craft revival, in this respect it was unable to entirely control its practical consequences.

Government infrastructure still plays a significant part in supporting and enabling the craft practitioner through the activities of the Crafts Council and *Crafts*, which are still very active today. More recent organisations such as Craft Scotland, whose aim is to support and grow the Scottish sector, also play an important role. Parallels to the 1970s may also be drawn with the recent creation of a 'Craft Skills Advisory Board' to 'ensure that the voice of the craft community is heard at the very centre of government' (Hayes, 2012). This state-backed initiative prompted *Crafts* to feature an article in early 2011 issue entitled 'The Age of the Craftsman' - 'Why the government wants a craft revival' (Hayes, 2011). Although it is early days, the rhetoric of this initiative mirrors some of the CAC ideals of the 1970s, and should be an interesting development to watch.

The 1970s craft revival can also be linked to changes in fine art ideology at this time. Contemporary fine art in the twentieth century was largely defined by the rise of conceptualism, which gave precedence to ideas over making. The art historian Edward Lucie-Smith provided a critical context for the craft revival in his text, *The Story of Craft* (1980), arguing that the renewed interest in craft was a result of changes in fine art: 'there began to appear a hunger for physical virtuosity in the handling of materials, something which many artists were no longer happy to provide' (Lucie-Smith, 1980: 274). As fine artists increasingly rejected traditional craft skills in art, craft practitioners conversely found a renewed sense of purpose through skilled forms of making. However the craft revival could not be characterised solely by a preoccupation with craft professionalism and skill. Craftspeople also looked to ideas in fine art in order to find greater meaning by exploring the avant-garde. This version of crafts was called 'the new crafts' and was encouraged by the CAC. In the words of writer and critic



¹ The cover of the first issue of *Crafts* magazine, launched by the Crafts Advisory Committee in March 1973. Photographer: Rob Matheson, Artist: Judith Lewis. First reproduced in *Crafts* magazine No. 1. 1973.

Peter Dormer: 'The crafts world divides between those who have a conservative ideology ... and those who seek a form of decorative arts avant-garde, based often on a denial not only of function but also the primacy of skill' (Dormer, 1990: 148). To add to this mix was the general upsurge of interest in craft activity in the 1970s, which included amateur, DIY craft as well the revival of more traditional aspects of hand-making. All of these approaches to craft contributed to a situation that can generally be referred to as a craft revival, but with very different agendas and outcomes.

The current craft revival equally owes its existence to ideological changes in fine art practice. As conceptualism began to lose its impetus at the end of the twentieth century, artists increasingly turned to craft as a new means of expression. There are many examples of this, but a recent manifestation was the Henry Moore Institute exhibition *Undone – Making and Unmaking in Contemporary Sculpture* (Sept 2010- Jan 2011), which featured contemporary artists who used traditional and improvised craft techniques and favoured tactility and materiality over conceptualism.

Finally, the craft revival of the 1970s can be associated with a prolonged period of significant political, social, economic and technological change. Useful parallels can be made here with both the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as well as the current interest in crafts. (Minahan and Cox, 2007: 5 and Kaplan, 2005: 11). Each of these periods consistently feature a collective fear of change, including the threat of a loss of individual creative autonomy and quality of life. In these circumstances, craft practice and its accompanying lifestyle appears to offer a meaningful and attractive antidote to change.

In the 1970s Britain experienced a number of socio-economic upheavals, which led to a general loss of confidence in the government and its institutions (Chartrand, 1988: 44). These include the oil crisis of 1973, inflation, an economic recession, growing public sector debt, rising unemployment and industrial strikes. Global events, including the American war in Vietnam, student rebellions in Berkeley and the Sorbonne in 1968, galvanised an emergent youth counter-culture who opposed consumerism and conformism. Added to this, a concern for the impact of industrial processes and nuclear proliferation gave rise to the modern environmental movement while first wave feminism and the questioning of women's roles in society added to an overall atmosphere of change and unrest. It can be argued that all of these conditions were broadly sympathetic to the adoption of a craft ethos, and were a crucial part of the craft revival in the 1970s.

Evidence of this can be seen in *Crafts*, which in the 1970s featured articles about individuals who had rejected a life of urban corporate conformism in favour of moving to the country to set up craft workshops. The idea of pursuing an alternative lifestyle as a craftsperson was depicted as appealing and worthy. However this yearning for a preindustrial lifestyle was largely escapist, and often resulted in a rise of amateur craft activity that was lacking in skill and content (Harrod, 1999: 400). This particular aspect of the craft revival had little in common with the kind of contemporary, quality craft that the CAC was striving to promote.

The socio-economic landscape of our current craft revival shares many points of commonality with the 1970s, in terms of economic instability, concerns over the depletion of natural resources, dissatisfaction with government involvement in wars and a desire to reject consumerism and private sector values. However there are some important differences. Although both movements might share the same yearnings for a simpler, less consumer-driven past, it has been argued that contemporary craft movements such as Stich'n'Bitch reference the past with a sophisticated sense of irony, rather than a nostalgic idealism (Minahan and Cox, 2007: 6). Contemporary crafting is also a less solitary activity than it was in the 1970s, and makes use of information technology as well as social media networks to form global user groups, share information and encourage collective practice. While the current craft revival may critique modernity, it also embraces it.

Examining the craft revival of the 1970s provides an opportunity to critically reflect upon the current attention being paid to the crafts. We have seen the importance of the state in supporting and enabling makers and the limitations of government policy when attempting to impose a particular ideology on disparate craft constituents. It has also been shown that changes in attitudes to craft can be linked to conceptual shifts in fine art. Specific social, economic and environmental concerns such as the impact of mass production and economic recession, dissatisfaction with consumerism, growing environmental awareness and the desire to revert to a simpler life, are also elements which each period share, and which have led to a desire to embrace craft. These causal factors have heralded craft movements over the last two centuries, and strongly suggest that the desire to return to 'making' can be linked with much wider contextual parameters within culture and society.



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