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The Invention of Craft

Glenn Adamson
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Reviewed by Andrea Peach

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The Invention of Craft marks the end of Glenn Adamson's career as head of research at London's V&A museum, which he joined in 2005, and the beginning of his new post as director of New York's Museum of Arts and Design (MAD). A sequel, or rather, a prequel to *Thinking Through Craft* (2007), it is also Adamson's coda to craft. As its ur-champion for over a decade, Adamson has worked hard to raise the profile of craft scholarship and discourse - be it through the establishment of the *Journal of Modern Craft* (2008), the publication of *The Craft Reader* (2009), or the securing of funding for craft PhD studentships. Adamson is also a regular on the craft conference circuit, and an enthusiastic contributor to *Crafts* magazine, as well as other contemporary craft journals. But now, Adamson writes, it is time for him to say goodbye to craft as a crusade (Adamson 2013: 38-39). If *The Invention of Craft* is indeed his craft swansong, it is a very thought-provoking finale.

Adamson's motivation as academic craft campaigner began with his compulsion to challenge its inferior status. His publication, *Thinking Through Craft* (2007), was singular for its time, in that it approached the subject not as an object or process, but as a theoretical concept, an idea. Since that time, there has been a wave of interest in 'making', evidenced across many forms of media, in particular, an unprecedented explosion of texts on craft. Unfortunately very few have engaged seriously in historical discourse, a paucity that has been lamented by curator and academic, Paul Greenhalgh (Greenhalgh 2009). This, in my opinion, is the book's most important academic contribution. At a time when we are metaphorically wallowing in craft of every description, we are at most risk of perpetuating its most egregious stereotypes. Adamson is on hand to dispel them. What we must remember he argues, is that craft, at least our modern perception of it, is simply a construct - a construct of modernity.

It is through the challenging of received histories of craft, many of which have been passed down to us from Morris and Ruskin but stubbornly continue to defy resistance, that Adamson debunks the myth that craft was diminished as a result of modernity. On the contrary, Adamson argues, our modern concept of craft was invented as a result of, as well as an antidote to, modernity. Rather than something threatened and in need of revival or protection, Adamson maintains that craft is, and has always been, a potent and pervasive force in contemporary production. To demonstrate this, he divides his book into four myth-busting themes: manipulation, mystery, mechanical, and memory. Each begins with a compelling historical anecdote that sheds new light on a neglected corner of craft's history. Through careful analysis of primary sources evidencing the development and differentiation of craft practices, he traces the origins of our current misconceptions about craft, and explains how they have become ingrained in our contemporary consciousness. It is here that Adamson's gift of combining historical narrative and analysis comes into its own, as he uses his case

studies to build a theoretical framework from which he extrapolates important parallels that can be made with contemporary practice. So many recent texts on craft have ignored the crucial importance of historical context. Adamson's text substantiates that in order for craft scholarship to develop and remain critical, it is essential to continually interrogate its history.

The first chapter, Manipulation, revisits the supposed truism that nineteenth century capitalism led to mechanisation, which led to a division of labour, which led to the inevitable deskilling of the individual maker. This received history dictates that it was through technological determinism that the crafts lost their agency. By examining the furniture and wood carving trade, Adamson presents a very different interpretation, positing that certain crafts managed to preserve their autonomy precisely because they were unable to be reproduced by machine. Similarly, the division of labour, he argues, in many instances led to an increase rather than a decrease of skills, as subdivision led to more specialisation. The myth that craft became redundant as a result of mechanisation is thoroughly debunked here, as clearly machines could not replace all aspects of handwork. Instead the craftsperson, and specifically manual skills, is shown to play a pivotal role throughout the industrial revolution.

The second chapter, Mystery, introduces several craft dichotomies. First Adamson explores how after 1750 craft expertise and know-how, once carefully guarded through the apprenticeship and guild model, was increasingly made available for public consumption through trade publications and patents. This 'assault on secrecy' (p. 74), on the one hand eroded the autonomy of the skilled maker. However the modern invention of craft also promulgated the idea that craft knowledge was largely tacit, intuitive and unscientific, and therefore could only be learned by doing. Adamson argues that this separation between thinking and doing was in fact a modern invention, as prior to the industrial revolution there was no when it came to making. The subsequent distinction between handmade and mass-produced objects imbued the handmade object with qualities of mystery and enchantment that were previously non-existent; a differentiation that prevails today and explains craft's enduring appeal and 'otherness'.

Chapter three, Mechanical, continues on the theme of invention, confronting modern attitudes about craft and its relationship to industry as a result of mechanisation. The first, was that artisans were the ignorant intellectual equivalent of machines. Prior to the nineteenth century, Adamson argues, it was accepted that artisans were both conscious and self-conscious about their work. It was only later craft that was deemed to be a wholly anti-intellectual activity, 'in the hands', rather than 'in the mind' (p. 139). The second notion he dispels is the association of craft practice with individual creativity and expression, an old Arts and Crafts axiom. The concept of the 'one-off' he explains, is very much a modern idea, as up until the end of the eighteenth century mimesis was a key characteristic of craft production.

The final chapter, Memory, explores the origins of the commonly held belief that the agency of craft was diminished as a result of industrialism. Drawing interesting and original parallels with the emergence of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Adamson argues, that the story of craft's alleged disappearance, or 'narrative of loss' (p. 183) was invented as a means of negotiating the destabilising and traumatic effects of modernity. Here Adamson thoroughly dismisses the tired notion that craft was the

enemy of modernity, or that artisans were superseded by machine. Craft, rather than being outside of the narrative of modernity, he argues, was very much a complicit partner, playing an active part in its creation.

The Invention of Craft has already received many critical accolades, rendering another positive review somewhat redundant. However I would concur that this book makes a timely and important contribution to craft history and theory, by advancing the discourse and exposing commonly held tropes. Generously illustrated, it is meticulously researched and referenced, and offers up an imaginative range of comparisons with contemporary fine art and design practice. At times the contemporary parallels appear disparate to the point of abstraction, however this is a valuable exemplar to anyone who might think that there is nothing to be gained from revisiting the history of craft. Whether *The Invention of Craft* really is Adamson's final word on craft remains to be seen. After all, he is taking up a post at an institution previously known as the American Museum of Craft. Could this be his next crusade?

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