

THE CRAFT OF THE SENSES

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This essay is concerned with theorizing the relationship between craft and the senses. Not an easy task, it turns out, for craft and craftsmanship are not highly regarded in academic circles. Indeed, they are often targets of disparagement. For example, "Basketweaving 101" is a derogatory label typically applied to introductory level college or university courses like "Anthropology 101" (which I happen to teach). Where does basketweaving's reputation as a Mickey Mouse sort of subject, best suited to the academically challenged, come from? [note 1] Part of the answer has to do with the conventional western hierarchy of the senses, which opposes sight to touch as mind is opposed to body, and which heaps honours on vision as "the noblest sense" while relegating touch to the lowest, most "primitive" rung of the sensorium. This privileging of vision in turn informs the ranking of painting – given its association with the eye – as the "finest" of the arts and basketry along with all the other so-called handicrafts, as belonging to the opposite, "manual" (read: crude) end of the value spectrum. A moment's reflection reveals the spuriousness of this classification: a painter needs more than a "good eye" to paint, just as a weaver needs more than dexterous fingers to produce a fine basket. The former needs a good hand too, while the latter will want to develop a discerning eye, but this fact concerning what could be called the intersensoriality of both art and craft is overridden by the opposition between sight and touch in the hierarchy of sensing, which in turn underpins the distinction between art, on the one hand, and craft on the other in the art/craft value system.

It might seem that the hierarchy of the senses is given in nature. Sight is the most important or "highest" of the senses because it is the most informative. But the idea of there being a natural order of the senses is deeply problematic from a cross-cultural and/or historical perspective. Research in the history and anthropology of the senses has shown that the hierarchy of the senses varies from one society to another, and is normally linked to a hierarchy of social values (Classen 1997). For example, the top-ranked sense of sight in the West has traditionally been associated with the highly-valued

faculty of reason. This association was particularly strong in the Age of Reason (also known as the Enlightenment, significantly) and remains so to this day. The lowly sense of touch, by contrast, has been associated with mere physical sensation, the “mindless” pleasures and pains of the body. But there is nothing necessary about this ordering. For example, in many peasant societies, which tend to be oral societies, it is hearing and not sight that is the most highly valued faculty. Sight is associated with the “evil eye,” and therefore held to be dangerous, not civilized, and to be censored, not exalted.

The cultural construction of the senses affects how people perceive the physical world by shaping which senses people trust (e.g. eyewitness versus hearsay evidence) and which senses they exercise most (e.g. using eyes to read, not fingers, although it is possible to use touch to read – as in the case of Braille). It also affects how people relate to each other. Research in the history and anthropology of the senses has shown that high-status social groups will be associated with the higher senses and lower status social groups with the lower senses. One instance of this can be found in a classificatory scheme proposed by Lorenz Oken, a prominent nineteenth century natural historian. Oken postulated a sensory hierarchy of human races, with the European “eye-man” at the top, followed by the Asian “ear-man,” the Native American “nose-man,” the Australian “tongue-man,” and the African “skin-man” (Howes 2009: 10-11). The hierarchy of senses, and of races, presented in Oken’s classificatory scheme is not based on any intrinsic characteristics of the peoples concerned but on their social ranking within the Western imagination.

Sensory ideologies of gender have paralleled those of race in the West (Classen 1997). As a general rule, men have tended to be associated with the “higher,” “spiritual” senses of hearing and especially sight while women were associated with the “lower,” “animal” senses of smell, taste and touch. This gender division of the senses was linked to a gender division of social spheres. As Constance Classen’s work has shown, the supposed masculine mastery of sight and hearing was deemed to fit men for such activities as travelling, studying and ruling (overseeing), while the female association with the proximity senses made women the guardians of the home, mistresses of the kitchen, the bedroom, and the nursery

Such gendered divisions of sensory life had enormous social force. To transgress them was seen as a crime against nature (Classen 2004). For example, female writers and artists traditionally found themselves having to continually justify why they practised the visual, masculine activities of writing and painting instead of engaging in more feminine sensory pursuits such as cooking and sewing (Classen 1998, ch. 4). They were seen as

betraying their sex when they used their senses in a masculine fashion. The social force of the distinction between the sensory-social spheres of men and women is reflected in the fact that there are many Old Masters in the history of Western art (Titian, Rembrandt, etc.) but next to no Old Mistresses.

Interestingly, the sexes are more equally represented in the domain of craft. The same could be said of the senses. The latter point is nicely brought out by studio jeweller and craft historian Bruce Metcalf in "Replacing the Myth of Modernism." In this essay, Metcalf launches a spirited critique of the Modernist theory of art and goes on to propose that craft must be valued on its own terms rather than (continue to) be approached through the (distorting) lens of Modernism. The two most basic tenets of Modernism are the autonomy of the art object ("art for art's sake"), and the doctrine of formalism. Craft objects are discounted from being regarded as art because of their usefulness (which undermines the "disinterested" attitude proper to aesthetic judgment), and because they are contentful due to their materiality rather than reducible to the purely formal, abstract elements of colour, line, plane, and so on. They are also, as Metcalfe notes, "substantially made by hand" rather than springing from the mind's eye, like painting. What all this means is that craft objects do not fit the visual mold of Modernism, and that is why they tend not to be considered art. But this apparent failure, Metcalfe argues, is actually the key to their production and also integral to how we enjoy them.

Some of the most pervasive and least examined aspects of craft are its sensuous qualities, especially its appeal to touch. Reductive Modernism [as exemplified above all in the work of New York art critic Clement Greenberg – see Jones 2006] restricted aesthetic experience in the visual arts to sight alone, as if no other pleasures were possible. But craft objects, because they are used in so many ways, engage all the senses but taste. When a pot is held it conveys weight, balance and density. Lifting a heavy, thick-walled pot is very different from holding a thin, light one. The surface texture of clay and glaze is experienced at the same time, and offers a distinct pleasure. Weavers and garment makers are conscious of the feel of different fabrics, from silk to denim. The material controls how the garment feels, how appealing it is, how well it will insulate, and how it will drape and weigh on the body. None of these experiences rely on sight, but all of them have an aesthetic component (Metcalf 2007: 28)

Metcalf goes on to adumbrate other uses of the non-visual senses in the production and reception of crafts, such as the way a potter will ring the rim of a pot (as one would a bell) with her finger in order to test the fit of the glaze and clay body, or the practice of

clinking glasses when making a toast. Metcalf concludes by noting that

So far ... most people seem content to remark that such phenomena occur, and do not consider how sight, touch and hearing can be organized in a unified composition. Craftspeople intuitively make judgments of how sound or touch intersects with the visual but never think much about it (28, emphasis added)

Following Metcalf, we should think more about how craft emerges from the intersection of the senses -- that is, we should question the reductive visualism of Modernism and replace it with an expansive sensualism, as it were, particularly if we are to properly theorize craft. I would add that we should think more about the social conditions of craft production, since sensory conditions and social conditions are intimately intertwined.

One scholar who has thought deeply about the intersection of social and sensory conditions in craft production is Constance Classen. In "Feminine Tactics: Crafting an Alternative Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," Classen brings out how the decorative pursuits which were fashionable for upper class women of the period (e.g. needlework, shellwork, papercraft) involved making a virtue of necessity - or, rather, social pressure. All of these forms of "ladies' work," as they were known, are "intrinsically tactile, intimate and homely" and hence fitted to women's social and sensory sphere, as discussed above. Classen gives the example of the eighteenth century gentlewoman Mary Delany, who was known for her botanical illustrations (though nowhere near as well known then as she is today thanks to Hayden 1980 and a slew of other publications, for Delany did not seek the limelight). As Classen avers, Delany could have painted the flowers but instead she chose to work with scissors -- the flowers are built up from hundreds of carefully cut pieces of coloured paper glued on a black background. This is because scissorwork was a particularly feminine practice whereas painting was not. Hence, Delany "excelled within the bounds of the socially permissible," as Classen puts it, being the very feminine creature she was, just as the richly textured, layered effect of the flowers she cut out "would be readily accessible to the fingertips but is less immediately apparent to the eye " (Classen 2005: 231).

Another fine example of the connection between tactility and alternative feminine aesthetics is A La Ronde in Exmouth, a sixteen-sided, two storey thatched cottage created by Jane Parminter and her cousin Mary. The house appears to have been modelled after the basilica of San Vitale at Ravenna, which the Parminters visited during the continental tour they went on shortly after coming into an inheritance. Just as striking

as the design of A La Ronde is its decoration. For example, there is a gallery on the second floor the walls of which are festooned with mosaics made out of shells, rocks, and porcelain fragments, interspersed with sixteen representations of birds executed in feathers, twigs and lichens, and as many gallery windows. The windows offer a commanding view of the countryside in all directions. But there is more to these windows and the walls in which they are set than meets the eye. In effect,

the countryside is ... brought within the house, through the use of natural materials such as feathers, twigs, lichens, rocks shells, sand and seaweed. This makes it possible not only to look out into the landscape but to enter into an intimate, haptic relationship with it through its aesthetic reconstruction within the house. The visual is given a tactile presence. The fracturing of unified visual perspective into a sensuous multiplicity is further enhanced by the fact that eight of A La Ronde's windows are placed on the angles of the house, creating two-sided vistas rather than flat "pictures" of the exterior (Classen 2005: 234)

In the conclusion to "Feminine Tactics," Classen emphasizes that, while ladies' work was influenced by the visual arts, it was "not simply a feminized version of art: it had its own repertoire of techniques, media and products and its own set of values" (Classen 2005: 235). Cardinal among those values was that a work possess tactile presence, not just visual presence, as we have seen (e.g. the fineness of the scissorwork in the case of Delany's paper cut-outs, the intricate textures of the walls of the second floor gallery at A La Ronde). Another key value that distinguished ladies' work is that it was private and noncommercial, unlike most masculine craftwork. It rarely left the home, and when it did it was in the form of gifts to female relatives and friends. In other words, such work was priceless. It transcended market value, unlike masculine craftwork, and unlike the fine art of painting.

Classen's analysis enables us to appreciate the value of women's craftwork in a radically fresh new and deeper way. Such work is not just for viewing, we come to realize: the trick is to develop a feel for it. (The fineness of Delany's scissorwork Classen's alternative feminine aesthetics could be extended to masculine craftwork. This would enhance our appreciation of what craftsmen do, though it would require some adjustments, presumably, since the calibration of the senses would not be the same for male craftworkers as for female. It could even be extended to art, especially art after Modernism, where there is much evidence of the "segmentation of the senses" under Modernism (as conceptualized by Clement Greenberg) giving way to "dramatic multisensory mixes and transpositions" (Jones 2007). In these turbulent times, Classen's

finely tuned sensory analytics might help resolve questions of whether a given piece should be classified as art or not (such as the pieces in the notorious Saatchi and Saatchi Sensation exhibition, which so offended the sensibilities of Mayor Giuliani and other New Yorkers). But let us not worry about art. Let us remain focussed on craft and the question of what it would take for craft to be valorized properly. Basically, it seems, it would take a complete revalorization of touch and the body relative to vision and the mind, and it would entail attending to the intersection of the senses rather than their isolation. Fortunately, this is no longer the unthinkable proposition it once was. Neurologist Frank Wilson's *The Hand* has precipitated a complete rethinking of the connection between the senses and intelligence, shifting the focus from the visual to the manual. Brain is hand and hand is brain, Wilson argues. At the same time, he makes clear that the hand works in concert with the shoulder, the other hand, and the eye. No part of the body can be isolated. The focus of analysis must be on the intersections.

Wilson's work is complemented by breaking research within anthropology centring on studies with craftspeople. One of the leading figures of this trend is the architect turned anthropologist, Trevor Marchand. Marchand has conducted fieldwork among the mud masons of Mali and minaret builders of Yemen, as well as fine woodwork trainees in Britain. His fieldwork has in each case taken the form of an apprenticeship to a master builder or craftsman, and involved "becom[ing] corporeally and sensually immersed in daily work activities with [his] colleague-subjects" in addition to "withstanding 'direct exposure to the trade hierarchy and the exercise of power within'" (Marchand 2008: 249). Like Classen, Marchand is sensitive to the intertwining of sensory conditions and social conditions.

Marchand was struck by the extent to which teaching and learning goes on independently of language, for the most part, on the building site as in the workshop, and depended instead on "an intercourse of visual, auditory, and somatic information." Demonstration-observation, imitation, and repeated exercise appeared to be the key to knowledge transfer, with the odd verbal cue or reprimand thrown in.

Marchand was particularly impressed by the way in which buildings in Yemen and Mali were constructed without the use of measured drawings or plans. In the absence of any template, "ideas took shape in the coordinated activities of eyes, ears, hands, and tools" (Marchand 2008: 248), and were also shaped by the social relations of production (the labourer's range of actions was different from that of the apprentice, whose sphere was in turn different [less capacious] than that of the master builder – and the latter's work was, significantly, the most visible). Marchand gives the example of how a minaret is

constructed from the inside out, with nothing more than a string attached to a central pole used to determine the diameter; the bricks are lugged up the (ever ascending) spiral staircase by the labourers, stacked by the apprentice, and then laid by the masterbuilder. And the master builder just knows when the proportions of the spire are correct because, as he says, "it fills my eye." This phrase speaks volumes about the "intercourse" between the visual and the haptic, or what Marchand calls "skilled performance" [note 2]

Based on his case studies of on-site learning and practice among masons and woodworkers, Marchand (2008: 245) concluded that there is need for an "expanded notion of knowledge that exceeds propositional thinking and language and centrally includes the body and skilled performance." This is an extremely promising line of inquiry and it is significant that Marchand published it in the British Journal of Educational Studies , for it means craft is finally beginning to acquire the academic attention it deserves. Studies with craftspeople could provide many key insights into what Marchand calls "understanding from the body." [note 4] Central to this venture should be a focus on the intersection of the senses in craft production, as advocated by Metcalf and Classen, or the "intercourse of visual, auditory and somatic information" as Marchand puts it. In this way, the old art/craft, visual/manual distinction will be overcome, and we will be able to valorize both arts and crafts individually and comparatively -- free of the prejudices (most notably the unthinking sensory biases) which have hampered their study to date.

1. For a defense of basketweaving see Howes 2007.
2. Central to the notion of skilled performance is a reflexive understanding of the relation between visual observation and physical action.

In watching another individual in action [performing a craft], our observation of the movement is not merely processed by our faculties of visual cognition and 'stored' as images that can be subsequently replayed in the 'mind's eye' to guide imitation. Everyone knows from experience that our ability to visually re-imagine someone else's expert performance carries no guarantee that we can re-enact the feat. Following neurologist Marc Jeannerod ... I suggest that watching another person's practice acts upon our motor-based understanding of that task. Imagery of bodily movement and activity processed by vision thereby serves as input to the motor domains of our cognition where it is parsed into its constituent postures, gestures and actions and each is assigned a motor-based interpretation (Marchand 2008: 263).

3. Another anthropologist to watch in this connection is Fran Mascia-Lees. She has been exploring the “aesthetic of attending” which is cultivated by those who belong to the latter day U.S. Arts and Crafts Movement (artisans and collectors alike) -- a movement which was (re)born in the 1970s (it first flourished ca. 1895-1913) and has evolved into the focus of numerous conferences, art shows, museums, popular magazines and websites. U.S. Arts and Crafts adherents take a “genuine interest in details” (haptic and visual) of the objects with which they construct the interiors of their homes. One informant expressed the ideal as one of “soothing simplicity.” Interestingly, while it is possible to see the movement as a consumer trend, Mascia-Lees makes a strong case for recognizing the spirit it embodies as opening a crack in the “technocracy of sensuality” and “aesthetics of distraction” characteristic of late capitalism because of the way the Arts and Crafts aesthetic “hones sensory receptivity to the specificity of things.” Like Classen on the value of “ladies’ work,” Mascia-Lees invites us to contemplate how craft transcends conventional (market) value(s) even though it may become an object of commerce. Curiously, craft’s tactility, its very palpability, seems to be the condition for its transcendentality.

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