

Learning from Pre-Industrial Craft: Transcendence and Meaning in the Production of Practical Artifacts

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Summary statement

The production of practical, everyday artifacts before the advent of machine production was frequently characterized by a special sense of mission that transcended economic intent. This paper discusses comparable artifacts and published statements by two traditional crafts-persons, one Japanese and the other Native American, whose crafts were guided by an overriding sense of transcendent meaning. The intent is to suggest that current design practices may still be informed by the humanization that once characterized practical crafts.

Humanism

If we were to divide ways of thinking into two distinctly different frames of mind, one inspired by scientific objectivity and the other by the more subjective perspective of the humanities, then the frame of mind of the pre-industrial maker of useful artifacts tends more toward humanism than science.¹ For instance, the traditional crafts-person characteristically insisted the artifacts he or she produced embody recognizable meaning in addition to their utility, and that his or her role in their creation should be one of humility toward Nature upon which the artifacts are ultimately dependent, and toward those for whom the product of their craft is intended. I will cite two examples that demonstrate this particularly well.



HIROSHIMA KAZOU



Hiroshima Kazuo, Basket Maker

Mr. Hiroshima, like other traditional itinerant basket makers in Japan, traveled throughout farming districts crafting useful baskets for farm families. The many types of baskets he made included rice planting and harvest baskets to be worn like a backpack by each family member while working their fields. Each such basket was crafted to fit the wearer comfortably, shaped to the size and other physical characteristics of each individual. Other baskets included eel and fish traps, holding baskets for freshly caught fish, baskets to protect newborn chicks from cats and dogs, colanders and sieves for sifting rice, household trays and baskets for dining—and so fourth.

When asked by an interviewer why he used bamboo to make his baskets, Mr. Hiroshima's answer was, "Because bamboo has a great spirit. . . [It strives to reach the light, so] it grows straight and tall and is beautiful. . . The nodes of a bamboo stock may divide it into many

separate sections, but in its heart it always stretches in a single line straight toward the sky. . . Making a good basket is more like a form of prayer. When I'm working I keep telling myself, Do it well, do it well. I want to make something that will please the person who uses it and suit that person's needs."²

The difference between a traditional crafts person's answer to, for instance 'why use bamboo', and a more objective answer that you or I might give is revealing. We would likely point out that bamboo, a member of the grass family, grows with each stock close to the next so that in competition to reach the light each stock grows upward along a straight line, having evolved the most efficient way to maximize growth during the summer growing season. Mr. Hiroshima, on the other hand, provides a distinctly transcendent explanation, obviously the result of a deeply felt personal identification with his craft and a sense of gratitude for the natural material, bamboo, that makes it possible. Also evident in his answer is an obvious sense of humility—humility toward nature and by extension, the natural world in which he lives.³



MARIA POVEKA MARTINEZ



Maria Poveka Martinez, Potter

Native American pueblo potter Maria Poveka Martinez's traditional design motifs are those of her pueblo, San Ildefonso. They hold special meaning having to do with crops, weather and the land and certain wild animals of the region. Her early training as a potter was to make pots for such uses such as carrying water, cooking, and for storage.

Pottery is traditionally a woman's craft among the matriarchal societies of the pueblos. From interviews with Maria Martinez one comes away with a strong impression of her consummate humility, which she considered integral to her craft. "I just thank God because it [the potter's skill] is not only for me; it's for all the people." She frequently expressed the importance of passing her craft on to young women of her pueblo: ". . . the Great Spirit, my Mother Earth gave me this luck. So I'm not going to keep it. I take care of our people." After her retirement, she said "I was never selfish with my work. . . The spirit of the ones that passed away told me to love one another while we are on this earth."⁴

Harold Littlebird, poet of Laguna and Santo Domingo pueblos, wrote that "She lived a life of accomplishment and world-wide recognition, yet she had retained her Pueblo sense of simplicity and harmony with all life around her." He wrote this poem for her:

*We will remember Poveka, this gentle lady of clay
She who shaped the earth fondly
As if caressing a child's hand
Worked a smooth river of stone with ageless care and wisdom
Polishing with prayer, blessing with fire
And shared with all humanity her life's harmony.*⁵

Encouraging a Special Frame of Mind

Together these examples demonstrate the importance of humility, respect for those who went before as well as for those who will use one's crafted objects, and a respect for Nature and the natural materials of one's craft. Because Hiroshima Kazuo is Japanese, his sense of respect for nature, especially the presence of spirits within it, is likely inspired by Japan's indigenous Shinto.⁶ And for Maria Martinez, the importance of humility toward society and nature is natural to her life as a member of a pueblo culture. But both these qualities reside in both Martinez and Hiroshima and are reflected as well in varying strengths throughout the world of traditional crafts that, before machine production, were necessarily to the production of useful things.

These same qualities are ones that characterize the humanities. A scientific frame of mind doesn't necessarily preclude them, but it doesn't automatically encourage them either.⁷ Abstractions such as "the market", "competitive advantage", "publicity", "materials procurement" and the like—frames of mind that are integral to a highly charged commercially oriented industrialized world—reveal a very different way of thinking about creating and producing practical things. Especially in recognition of a designer's responsibility toward an ever more threatened natural environment, perhaps the education of industrial designers and architects might consider the mindset of the traditional crafts-person's humanistic frame of reference. While this may sound like an attempt to resurrect the Arts and Crafts Movement, it is not. Instead, the intent is to simply suggest that current design practices, especially in architecture, may still be informed by the humanization that was once integral architecture—that is when it too was one among the practical pre-industrial crafts.

¹ The term humanism is used here as "...any system of thought or action based on the nature, interests, and ideals of man..." (fm. *Webster's New World Dictionary*); in particular, philosophical tenets which recognize basic human values of dignity, welfare, and understanding that lie beyond or in addition to objectively factual, functional, and/or strictly quantifiable information.

² Louise Allison Court and Nakamura Kenji, *A Basketmaker in Rural Japan, Catalog for the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1994), p. 65.

³ Today, basket requirements of rural farms throughout Japan are largely met by products from the American company Rubbermaid. Rubbermaid products are characteristically more generalized in their design, with each item of production adjusted to accommodate the broadest range of applications. Rubbermaid rice planting and harvesting baskets for instance are designed as one-size-fits-all.

⁴ Richard L. Spivey, *The Legacy of Maria Poveka Martinez*, (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2003), p. 182.

⁵ Spivey, p. 184.

⁶ Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, (New York: Kadibsga USA Inc., 2013).

⁷ See: Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998).