

Shifting Domains: From Making Objects to Growing Objects

This paper argues that shifting our focus from 'objects that are made' to 'objects that are grown' is consistent with the organic theory of nature that influenced the development of contemporary craft. Examples from practitioners, their working processes, environments and their objects (with reference to holistic philosophy) will elucidate how this shift moves us towards a more reliable underpinning philosophy for contemporary craft that is analogous with the sustainability movement.

The main philosophy that influenced the development of the Arts & Crafts movement was German Romanticism. The Scot Thomas Carlyle acted as the main conduit for German thought. His correspondence with the German artist, scientist and poet Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe was central in the development of many of the movement's ideals. However, it is only now that Goethe's work has been translated into English that we can have a deeper understanding of his major ideas and the implications for both craft practice and the sustainability agenda that also draws on the same roots.

Goethe whilst perceived by the Romantics as their leader considered Romanticism 'sick' as it placed too much emphasis on the emotions and subjective experience. Ultimately Goethe was more concerned with holism than with the idealism of the Romantics. Holism places a greater emphasis on relationship and participation within nature. Holism unlike romanticism does not give priority to the subjective but rather is concerned with a balance between this and the rational and objective. The Organic Theory of Nature, which Goethe and Schelling developed in order to counter the mechanistic scientific worldview of the time saw no distinction between the laws that apply to the animate and the inanimate realms.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) equates 'making things' with production and an exploitive relationship with the natural world and 'growing things' with establishing the environmental conditions for their growth and development. He argues that the idea of 'making things' has shifted domains from the inanimate world to the animate and similarly that this shift can happen in the other direction from the animate to the inanimate. "What we call 'things' too are grown" Ingold is concerned with 'processes of growth' drawing an analogy between husbanding animals, cultivating plants and bringing up children. Contemporary philosophers Beiser (2001) and de Quincey (2002) also explore this 'constitutive status' of holism. Many contemporary crafts people talk (albeit in hushed tones) of how their work is alive, for example Laird (2001) describes the point '...where the work begins to breathe with its own life'. It should be clear that this is not the teleology associated with vitalism or animism but rather an organic unity.

The parallel between craft objects and living organisms is further strengthened when you consider that craft diversity is threatened in the same way that species diversity is threatened. Craft practices have been in decline since the 16th century and a recent report by the Countryside commission (2005) has identified how some crafts are so reduced as to be in danger of extinction. This shift is therefore urgently needed.