

Does Contemporary Craft Carry a Social Deficit? An Analysis Through Comparison with Related Creative Practices

Today in the West the use of the term 'craft' is restricted to describing professional practitioners working to aesthetic ideals derived from, and subordinate to, art theory. This definition also informs the actions and reactions of the governmental organisations, agencies and institutions that support craft. For the majority of craft practitioners, professional social engagement consists of presenting the results of their individual explorations of material and formal qualities in exhibitions, generally linked to an expectation of the sale of individual objects. In compulsory education, craft is supposedly taught as an element within both Art and Design and Technology, but is not coherently addressed as a distinct perspective or approach by either. In many post-compulsory institutions the long-term survival of extant craft courses is in question, with concerns raised regarding relevance and demand. How did craft find itself in this precarious and marginal situation, considering its centrality to the theories and actions of many influential reformers and social activists and critics in the West during the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

To provide a foundation for a critique of this situation, this paper will examine two examples of related creative practice, one from the US and the other the UK. This exploration will demonstrate that whilst both examples display strong similarities to elements of contemporary craft practice, their conceptual frameworks are very different and more socially responsible and responsive. Consequently both have been able to make a significant contribution to addressing relevant sustainability issues. The first example, Southwest Indian Jewellery, has been primarily defined either as 'tourist art' or 'Native American art'. The role Southwest Indian Jewellery played in economic sustainability and reducing environmental degradation across the Southwest United States during the early 20th century will be outlined, followed by a proposal as to why this occurred. The second example, 'earth architecture', has been categorised by government agencies in the UK as a 'heritage construction skill'. Despite such historical and traditionalist associations, earth architecture has been promoted by practitioners as an outstanding low-carbon technology and is currently undergoing a revival as an innovative method of 'sustainable construction'. The recognition and promotion of earth architecture's potential as a practical solution to environmental sustainability issues will be shown to be a consequence of the way earth building practitioners conceive of their actions, practice and identity.

The paper will then consider why, despite similarities in practice, neither these activities have adopted the classification of craft or developed a similar conceptual framework to the one that has come to dominate craft during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The result of this exploration will help explain the extent to which contemporary craft carries a 'social deficit' in its theory and practice. The paper will conclude by considering the extent to which the dominant conception of craft could attempt to readdress such a 'social deficit' and what the benefits and costs of doing so might be.