

Is it art or craft?

The master craftsman has come back into his own in the industrial age, even if the market prefers to regard his creations as art and not functional objects.

A FRIEND WHO IS A WELL-KNOWN WRITER OF cookbooks always says that a good recipe is a good recipe. It does not change much over time. The only thing that does change is how the outcome is presented (or how the food is styled, as she would put it). As I was researching this story, I kept realising how universal this truth is.

In April, the annual SOFA (Sculpture Objects and Functional Art) exhibition took place in New York. Mark Lyman created this forum about 15 years ago, when he realised that “artists who were creating modern works based in traditional media and forms” had nowhere to exhibit their work.

It sounds very smart: “artists who create modern works based in traditional media and forms”. From the images I saw on the SOFA website (www.sofaexpo.com), I surmised the marketing team might mean “unique and beautifully crafted hand-made objects made to the highest standards using the latest technology”. I guess that sounds a bit too “crafty”; people might be willing to pay more for something that is defined as “art that draws its reference from function or craft but transcends it to a place of beauty or intellect”. But is it art?

Man has been making objects for millions of years – it is one of our primary impulses. And whether these objects are ancient and rudimentary or brand new and cutting edge, they are always imbued with a function. And in most cases, the object has a certain aesthetic value, something that makes it pleasing to look at and lovely to touch. Sometimes the function is the aesthetic, in which case we call it art. Man, after all, is an aesthetic animal. For millennia, this aesthetic characteristic was the result of the process of production: the handyman or artisan created or added the beauty while he or she was making the object. With the advent of the industrial age, the direct and incremental control the maker exuded over the object came to an abrupt end.

Industrial production demands a single model that forms the matrix of all successive production of that same model. Sound Greek? It simply means that in the case of the mass-produced object, a single prototype is designed, developed, approved and then



PHOTOGRAPH: RED BLACK AND WHITE ART GALLERY

Room Divider, an authentic piece of art furniture by South African artist Shany van den Berg. In a bid to create a niche for themselves, the master craftsmen have claimed the title “artist” for themselves. Yet the question remains, is it art or is it craft?

copied ... and copied ... and copied. Any aesthetic consideration happens long before the item is made. Once a form or pattern is set, it is set; there can be no changes, no last-minute alterations, no spontaneous adaptations. To accommodate even the >>

>> slightest change, a new model has to be designed.

As Marshall McLuhan so aptly stated some decades ago: “The natural effect of any new technology is to create a new environment for itself.” So we created a new world where objects that were functional, cheap and beautiful were available to us all the time. In this new environment there was no longer room for the master craftsman who spent 60 hours making a single chair by hand. He was replaced by the imaginative draftsman who could design 60 chairs in one hour. So we found ourselves a new ruler: the industrial designer. Industry stars such as Philippe Starck are admired and copied by millions and millions of people. Books are written about their work, movies are made about their lives, and yet they probably never touch a tool other than a pencil or a computer in their entire lives. That is not what they do.

Return of the master craftsman

ONE OF MY MOST PRIZED POSSESSIONS IS A BOOK called *The Man-made Object*. In a series of essays, it explores “the man-made object as an important environmental factor in the shaping of our 20th-century mores, feelings and values”.

From it I quote: “The production in series of examples all identical is something very particular to our epoch, and something practically unknown in all previous epochs. Today the handicrafts are destined to become more than anything else a subsidiary of the pure arts and to assume those characteristics of preciousness of material and self-sufficiency of form which distinguish painting and sculpture.”

As far as ideas go, this one is interesting but not really that avant-garde or particularly insightful. Or is it? It is if you consider that the extract comes from a book published in the 1960s. The rather chilling accuracy of the prediction aside, what was essayist Gillo Dorfles really saying? He said that the master craftsman will survive, but that he will re-invent himself. The industrial revolution did not render him obsolete; it just sent him underground for a little while.

As the saying goes: you can't keep a good man down, so the master craftsman is back – he has re-surfaced. And now he is called an artist and he presents his work in art galleries – exactly the way Dorfles predicted 50 years ago. Nothing new in the recipe, just in how the product is presented. And the world is ready. For the first time in decades, there is a hunger for “handmade”. Teenage boys want hand-knitted beanies (and no, you can't fool them: they can spot a Chinese imitation a mile away).

It seems that we are tired of the bland perfection promised by the machine. We want it handmade and one-off. We want to feel the process of creativity – the margin of chance that a handmade object carries like an invisible aura. All of this seems to be informed by two basic instincts: man's need to create and his need to again see man in the created object.

And the artists/craftsmen are hard at work – that you can see from the number of exhibitors at the SOFA fair in New York and at the recent Design Indaba (www.designindaba.com) in Cape Town. There is a plethora of fantastic contemporary talent. This is not just an international trend.

But a word of warning: even though these pieces of furniture and decorative objects are pure and astonishing beautiful, they can sometimes be a bit pricey. At the top end of the international spectrum, they often come with a POA label, which means that if you have to ask the price, you probably cannot afford the item. Considering the enormous amount of energy, time and money that goes into producing these masterpieces, a hefty price tag is completely warranted. And that's probably why the “art” tag has become a necessity. People really are willing to pay more for art.

But is it art? Granted, some of the objects are extremely artistic and experimental, but, as a furniture historian, I can assure you that every generation of creators, whether they were furniture makers, ceramicists, jewellers or silversmiths, were in their own time “creating modern works based in traditional media and forms”.

A false dichotomy?

SO HOW DOES ONE DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE work of the artist and that of the craftsman? More to the point, is it even necessary to try to distinguish? Post-modernists would say no. Their notion of blurred boundaries represents to them an act of liberation, and their view is still the flavour of the month. At the other end (the very out-of-fashion end) of the intellectual scale: to someone who is passionate about the glory of art, the genius of design and the attainment of the master craftsman, these blurred lines smack of disrespect, arrogance and a slight pathology.

Art is about the aesthetic. Every other object concerns itself with function. Art is fantastic, but so is a magnificently crafted piece of furniture (for instance). I, for one, would rather sit on a chair than on a sculptural object and eat off a table than off a piece of functional art.

I wonder what the brilliant Korean Bae Sehwa (www.sehwabae.com/1.html) makes of all this. He is more than anything else interested in the craft of his art, not the idea or the concept of it. Like the artisans of old, he is preoccupied by the processes of production itself.

The new masters are still working in the tradition of the old masters; they adhere to the same principles; they are inspired by the same excellence and yet make use of the latest technologies. Everything changes and nothing changes. The master craftsman is dead, long live the master craftsman (even if sometimes he calls himself an artist now).

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