

**FINE CRAFTS, A SHORT HISTORY
TEXTILES AND OTHERS
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Before the Industrial Revolution, craftspeople were the producers of all of the products used in Western society. Paper, furniture, rugs, eating utensils, soup-ladles; everything was produced by hand. When the crafted item was produced as a business, there was a whole system of regulations involved. Guilds were formed to help govern these regulations. The Guilds trained their craftspeople through the procedure of apprentices, journeymen, and masters. These Guilds, especially in Medieval times, were politically and financially powerful. In fact, whole cities were founded by Guild dynasties.

In addition to these formal systems, an informal approach to craft production was also occurring. The peasantry, out of necessity, had to make their own products. People could not afford to buy woven cloth, they had to produce it themselves. While people couldn't afford to buy their goods, they were also not all equally talented in all areas of production. Often they bartered amongst themselves. For instance, one person good at basketry might trade a potato gathering container for a hand-made felt hat. If someone was particularly good at some craft, they might try to find the time to produce extra items, and sell them at the local farmer's market. So, parallel to the formal Guild system, another layer of crafts making was occurring.

The Industrial Revolution had a disastrous effect on the Guild System. Machines took the place of people. Skilled workers who required years of apprenticeship were no longer required. The wonderful, hand-crafted products produced by the Masters were no longer needed, because industrialization could produce items which were equally utilitarian, and much cheaper. While not all of the crafts were affected, most were. Today there are very few places left in the Western World where the apprenticeship system still exists in a direct line to the pre-Industrial Revolution days.

The effect of the Industrial Revolution on the peasantry was somewhat different. By the end of the 1700's, land was scarce in Europe. There were more farmers than land available. When factories were built throughout Europe in the early 1800's, many people left the farms to find work in the industrial areas. This meant that fathers and mothers were no longer able to hand down their craft skills to their children. It also meant that the children wanted a new "city" life and that making crafts was a part of "the old ways". By the middle of the 1800's many of the home/farm craft skills were beginning to be lost.

In England, a group of intellectuals lead by William Morris, began to fear that the loss of hand craft would also mean the loss of an essential part of the human spirit. These people began a movement called the "Arts and Crafts" movement. They sought to document the dying crafts so that there would be some record of them. In addition, they trained themselves and other upper-class intellectuals in these crafts. While they did not re-establish the true apprenticeship system, they did keep alive the home/farm crafts. Interestingly enough, they brought the making of crafts from being a necessary part of every peasant's life to being a leisure time pursuit of the middle-class or wealthy.

By the early 20th Century, philanthropists were making concerted efforts to get schools and organizations similar to Scouts, established for the children of millworkers and other inhabitants of the cities. Crafts were introduced into the curriculum to help maintain manual dexterity and promote self-confidence. While crafts skipped two or three generations, here it was again begin taught, not by a parent, but by a school. The objects being made were not needed as an essential part of the running of a farm, but as fuel for the human spirit.

These ideas have set the trend for crafts today. Very few people learn a craft from their parents, who learned it from their parents, etc. Most people turn to schools and organizations for their craft knowledge. In addition, items produced in industry can be made more cheaply. We do not need to rely on our ability as craftspeople to create all of the items we need for survival.

In my field, textiles, these philosophies are very apparent. It is unusual to find contemporary fiber workers who grew up learning textile craft skills as a necessary part of keeping their family fit and healthy. If they learned textile skills, they were usually applied to things which were used to beautify their lives; for instance, crocheted lace doilies, or embroidery done on commercially woven pillow cases. When I began doing art textiles 25 years ago, I had this kind of background. While I had a love of handwork, I did not need to create the items I used in everyday life. Like many other craftspeople, I was University trained in general art concepts, but I choose to work in fiber instead of paint. Since I was not compelled by need to make utilitarian items, I was able to concentrate on more spiritual and visual qualities. While I did create some works that functioned as clothing and home furnishings; they could be fantastical, one-of-a-kind

items. Other works were totally non-utilitarian. They were placed on the wall or on sculpture stands, and functioned as all modern art does.

The Fine Crafts Movement today is really influenced by the University or Art School training of most of its followers. We are trained in the aesthetics and history of Art as well as in the various technical aspects of our materials. With us; beauty, spirituality, and fantasy combine with function to create items that are beyond utilitarianism. With some, the function is to place the crafted object on the wall and to find happiness in looking at it. With others, the function is to use the crafted object to put on the head to keep the rain off. In all cases, however, there is probably some industrialized item that could perform just as well. However, no one person had control over that item. No artist poured heart and soul into that item, from its first stage to its last. Fine Crafts today go beyond utilitarianism. The dream of William Morris still lives on.

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