International Symposium

Values of Craft: craft as intangible heritage

Rotterdam, 1-2 March 2018

**Report of the Values of Craft: craft as intangible heritage International Symposium**

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The 2018 International Symposium on the Values of Craft: craft as intangible heritage sums a successful first edition. The event’s aim of exploring issues related to craft has generated two full days of important discussions, stimulating the active participation of national and international speakers, craftspeople, scholars, policymakers, students and general participants who shared an interest in the sector.

We appreciate the collaboration with the Crafts Council Nederland and the support of the Erasmus School of History, Culture, and Communication and the European Year of Cultural Heritage. We strongly consider the value and knowledge exchange that has been generated by the first edition of the Values of Craft Symposium as key in the development of research on the crafts sector, and as an incentive to create more of such stimulating environments for conversation and shared practices.

Exceeding our expectations, the symposium discussions have generate significant follow up ideas. The following notes aim to refresh our memory and draw a conclusion as to what are the most important emerging issues. We have drawn up a list, which can be found at the end of this document. Please inform us on whether there are any missing subjects, or you have suggestions. Once the list is finalised, you will be asked to vote on the issues considered most urgent.

As we indicated, we sought to have exploratory discussions. The first day of the symposium started with a discussion about definitions, and the question whether definitions really matter. Those most involved in craft practices questioned the need to have clear definitions. Susanne Oude Hengel and Simone Post presented their work in the evening. Based on the previous research done, we would define them designers or creative craftspeople on the cutting edge. Would that matter? They do what they do. The scholars among us care about definitions, because we observe differences in the practices (it is different to explore new techniques and experiment with all kinds of materials or to make scissors every day). Furthermore, when we want to compare crafts practices in different countries, it is not always evident what to compare: we need to identify what to compare.

The contribution of Francesca Cominelli made clear, though, that the urgency of defining crafts is a governmental issue, for the purpose of getting good statistics and setting a basis for policy. This aspect emerged also from the presentation of Kazuko Goto: budget constraints limit the list of Living Heritage; definitions are necessary in order to be able to have access to funds. Francesca Cominelli, used UNESCO’s focus on community as a basis to introduce the notion of crafts as commons. The discussion that followed highlighted the importance of 3 elements: people, materials, skills.

The value based approach introduced by Arjo Klamer stresses the valorisation issue—the realization of values such as quality of work, of practices, and of products. The approach emphasizes:

a) the different logics that apply in the valorisation (market, governmental, social, oikos, and cultural logics)

b) the notion of shared practices; people need to contribute in order to be part of a shared practice. In case of the crafts this means that they either become active in the making of things, or in the appreciation and using of craft products. (Shared practices follow social logics)

c) the notion of craftsculture to indicate that crafts need an appropriate culture (as in shared values, sense making practices) to flourish.

We discussed the education issue by way of the contributions of Kazuko Goto and Judy Frater. The latter presented the practices and approach of the center in India, where she works to help people from social and financial disadvantaged backgrounds to develop skills and establish themselves within the Indian craft fashion market. Interestingly, the courses thought at the centre also try to help artisans build competences in marketing and management. Judy Frater underlined how in India there is not a specific word for design hence it was traditionally included in craft. However, now it seems that design has become more valuable than craft, the latter being considered a minor means of production. The most talented artisans are asked to make simple uniform for schools or blankets for trains. Judy Frater, concluded her contribution emphasizing the need for a market/markets for these crafts: a proper education is important to support a craft culture but is not sufficient.

The contribution of Bhagyalakshmi Daga (Arja) and Filip Vermeylen showed how a traditional craft expression is turning into an art work shared and exchanged on the market. Their work highlighted the effect of this change on the way artisans perceive themselves and their work (e.g. some start to sign their work), on the way the same craft object is realized and on the relationship between the artisans, their traditional ‘customers’ and the new buyers. They also investigated what happens when the logic of the market enters a social craft practice (in India). In the case they describe, this switch seems to enable craftspeople to earn a living with their craft and made the designs wider known. Still, intermediaries seem to be those who benefit most.

Kazuko Goto presented the situation of the craft practices in Japan. Worrisome is the ageing of craftspeople. Impressive is the chart that shows the geographical location of craft practices. She insisted throughout the symposium that the sense making in Japan differs from the way we make sense of crafts here in the west, drawing a sharp distinction with arts and design. She thinks that people in the west are more focused on the conceptual aspects of the crafts.

Lili Jiang pointed out that Chinese people tend to value the arts over crafts; Chinese craftspeople prefer to be considered artists. It seems then that in China the way of looking at craft is closer to the Western perspective, whereas Kazuko Goto underlined the lack of distinction between art and craft in Japan.

Marion Poortvliet sketched the situation in the Netherlands. She insisted on speaking of the making of things as a human quality. In her intervention she referred to heritage, the knowledge inside a community as something that need to be considered, and, in fact, the activity of the Craft Council started by mapping the existing knowledge.

Hurdles for further development of the crafts are:

* a lack of infrastructure,
* old fashioned opinion,
* no system of transmitting knowledge,
* no shared knowledge of best practices,
* No connection craft, industry, education
* No information about the importance of making.

The activities of the Craft Council aim at overcoming these problems.

The thesis of Priyatej Kottipalli elaborate the intangible heritage aspect of the crafts in India. The heritage dimension might be a reason for governments and the UNESCO to get involved. If the market cannot sustain craft practices that are important for the Indian identity, governmental support may be in order.

The heritage issue proved to be contested during the symposium. Should we emphasize the innovativeness of craft practices or their preservation? Kazuko Goto told that traditional craftspeople in Japan can be quite innovative. The development of new techniques is a quality of good craftsmanship. We settled that preservation and innovation can coexist, yet produce a tension in the world of crafts.

Are the crafts for the elite? Crafts can perish when they become too exclusive. Are we maybe romantic about the crafts? How about the business of the crafts? Entrepreneurship? Elisabetta Lazzaro made the connection with the literature on cultural entrepreneurship in her contribution.

Thora Fjeldsted showed how the thinking of the body got marginalized in modern economic thinking. The implication is that the consideration of bodily skills as in craft practices but also sport practices remains ad hoc. If we do not reconceptualise economics and re-evaluate the economic importance of bodily skills and practices, we will be condemned to scrimmages in the rear.

Maikel Kuijpers and Manual Montoya put the discussion in historical and global perspectives. They generated intriguing grand narratives. Maikel: as an archaeologist, asks himself how societies change. He showed how these changes (e.g. developing of farming) changed the way the world looked and the way humans looked at it. Maikel also underlined that material is the mother of innovation, and it is through skills that innovation is realized. He used the example of stone and bronze to give evidence of the differences in technologies (reductive, transformative). He questions the importance of tacit knowledge. Maikel added to the definition the differentiation between technical and performative skills. This makes it possible to include singing, acting and other practices as craft practices. Also, he stimulated to reflect on innovation as something which is constant and the possibility of duplicability/multiple objects

Manuel: reflected on changes in society: 19th centuries of empires; 20th century of nations. Now a century of uncertainty. Existential crisis. What kind of society. Global versus regional connectedness. He questioned whether craft is a meaningful component in this existential crisis? Indian, Chinese and Dutch craft: a funny way of appearing. Narrative of a nation through the materiality of craft. In his recount he referred to Alice in Wonderland: Alice never was, she is not, she is becoming. He underlined the importance of latitude and longitude. The role of global middle class: crafts as a way of sense making. Crafts as drives of economic development?

**Issues for further discussion**

Here follow some points we draw from the symposium:

1. Definitional issues: what counts as craft? As art? As design?
2. Definition of skills? Performative skills, technical skills. Spiritual skills? Design. Skills?

(Western people focus more on the conceptual; much less so in Japan). Bodily skills: relationship with sports

1. Craft cultures differ across countries. We need a better understanding of the differences,
2. Is the notion of crafts culture a contribution to the advocacy?
3. The need to study the importance of a good Infrastructure. Best practices.
4. The business of crafts. Financing, entrepreneurship
5. Education. Differences across nations. Best practices. Master-apprenticeship system. Need to develop craft skills & entrepreneurial skills.
6. Tension between (intangible) heritage aspect of the crafts and its innovative character. What to preserve? To what purpose? Kazuko: traditional crafts can be innovative.
7. For whom? Elitist? Qualities of work, of product, of processes, (connection with nature, spirituality, religion). The life of craft goods.
8. The challenge of cultural policies: where do the crafts belong? art? Creative industry? Heritage? Economics
9. Economics of crafts: economic impact. Also need for a market, importance of market. Risk from commercialization.
10. The need of case studies
11. Craft and design: risk of exploitation of the former from the latter. Attempt to change things. Innovation and design always part of craft.
12. Craft and sustainability:
    1. To keep craft going
    2. Social impact:
       * Maintenance of productions to provide materials for craft;
       * Improvement of conditions of artisans
       * Social Projects with craft.
13. Western approach: risk of too much conceptualizing and categorizing?
14. IP & craft: which protection for the sector?