A Dutch Perspective on Craft

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Pigs covered in tattoos and a gigantic lorry meticulously carved in wood -- setting different worlds side by side, the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye appeals to both 'the common people' and the formal art circuit. He leaves the technical execution to craftsmen. Traditional techniques and decorative patterns have also surfaced in the work of the Dutch designers Marcel Wanders and Hella Jongerius, among others. Wanders' Knotted Chair ignores specific properties of material and reverses expectations. Jongerius has embroidered a plate on a cloth for Embroidered Tablecloth which tells a story of conventional etiquette and new traditions. Awareness that traditional craft is an excellent means of telling stories and visualising ideas has penetrated the world of contemporary art and design in the last ten years. The impressive expertise of Babs Haenen, Barbara Nanning, Irene Vonck, Mieke Groot, Richard Price and fellow colleagues demonstrates that traditional craft could do even more than this. For centuries ceramists, glass designers and textile artists have understood that traditional techniques are not only the means but can also be the goal.

Craft is in. Since globalisation is an item on the agenda of world politics, preservation of traditions that are deeply rooted in local history is strongly advocated as well. Everywhere in the world, a unique, cultural identity is sought through, among others, handmade examples of age-old craftsmanship such as Venetian glass, Moroccan pottery, Turkish rugs, lace from Bruges, elaborate decorations from Mexico, Kenyan basket-weaving, wood carvings from Indonesia. Every corner in this world has its own speciality. However, there are more reasons behind the current revival of interest in local craftsmanship.

In 2004 Premsela, the Dutch design foundation, in association with the Prince Claus Fund, is organising a travelling exhibition which shows the importance of crafts from all over the world: the future is handmade. What will be on show -- relics from an ancient past as well as contemporary representatives of similar crafts, or the work of designers and artists that incidentally use traditional techniques, while ignoring the orthodox rules of the métier? The launch of the exhibition in The Netherlands provides a good reason to investigate the practice of traditional techniques in this country.

Worlds of Differences

The people who work with these techniques are roughly divided into two separate groups who hardly communicate, and worse, they look askance at each other's work. For the craftsmen, technique takes precedence over everything else. When it comes to know-how and skills, they surpass themselves and each other, usually using a peculiar mix of pragmatic information and obscure insider's jargon. So

the viewer has to assume that these very secrets, which are unchangingly connected to the method, define the object's exclusivity. It's no wonder that these 'experts' know how to pick out the failings in the works of inexperienced newcomers. In turn, the newcomers believe that the old school is too focused on the medium, neglecting its conceptual side. The fact that these two groups have grown apart from each other is connected to a persistent notion that craftsmanship has a very special place in the cultural spectrum.

Because of ceramists and glass and textile designers, craft has survived.
After all, these disciplines have been in trouble since the coming of industrial production methods. Why care for time-consuming and expensive procedures when utensils can be fastly and cheaply produced? Because of the artistic quality, as the crafts community would answer. However, development in technical terms has not led to pragmatic and economic results only. In the era of technical reproduction the unique and traditionally made object has also dropped in value from the artistic point of view. Artists and designers have seized reproduction techniques with both hands thereby robbing the unique object of its aura. Concepts like originality and authenticity lost their shine, the evidence of the making process and personal signature were looked down upon. If everything can be copied perfectly, there needs to be a better justification for art and design. At least, this was the issue for the avant-garde.

Transience in Art and Design

In the course of the twentieth century, the increasing possibilities of production would question the nature of the so-called object d'art in the art world. Reflection on the discipline and the growing importance of context swept aside the object. Sculptures and paintings, which by virtue of their nature claim uniqueness and originality, have been pushed away by more transient and non-substantial media.

The explosive development of production methods generated interesting viewpoints on originality and authenticity in the design profession as well. Of course, they could not take shelter in transience like visual artists (in life we need to find a real bathroom not a virtual one), but they came close. Industrial production summarily dismissed with marks of the making process in the final product and - perhaps even more essential - it became an economic factor of importance. For the first time in history, good design was available for a large number of people, and products manufactured in greater amounts gained ascendancy over traditionally made, unique objects. Innovation blended with ideology. From that time the avant-garde considered the marks in handmade products as a preoccupation with substance, an outdated and even petty way of producing and, overall, as a regressive way of thinking. Elaborate embroidery, rich carvings and meticulously applied patterns of glaze did not agree with the strict hygiene of the visual image which 'good' design demanded. Not surprisingly, the Bauhaus philosophy of form-follows-function found receptive

ground in The Netherlands since the 1920s and 1930s. Modernism would enthral Dutch designers until the end of the twentieth century when the slogan changed into form-follows-concept.

Droog Design, the Dutch platform of conceptual design promotes the work of designers who believe that form, function, use of material and decoration are rigorously subordinate to underlying ideas. Concept, humour, simplicity, and comment on the world and its own discipline come first. And all these ideas should be designed with a minimum of means. Conceptual design turns out to be closely related to the non-substantial world of contemporary visual art in terms of concept and ambition. For years now Dutch designers are reaping respect worldwide for most projects and products, even to the extent that Dutch design is mostly equated with conceptual design.

Tradition vs. Renewal

Of course, this does not concern those who have never left the traditional trades. While artists and designers abandoned crafts, ceramists and glass designers proudly retreated behind self-erected fortress walls of specialised expertise. They studiously control their own production capacity and potential markets; in art schools separate ceramic, glass and textile departments exist, and there are numerous profession-specific presentation platforms in galleries and museums. Tradition and skill are maintained for their own sakes, renewal takes place within the boundaries of these skills. So, it is not unusual that the craft disciplines have manoeuvred themselves outside the world of art and design with their own quality standards. These generalisations are certainly unfair to the artists Nick Renshaw, Jens Pfeifer, and designers Geert Lap and some others, who are originally trained as ceramists and glass artists, have received recognition within contemporary design and visual art. However, the majority of their similarly trained colleagues just work inside their own traditional section irrespective of whether they see their products as functional or autonomous objects. Even though the avant-garde has again taken up experiments in traditional techniques, these two separate worlds still exist. Rediscovered decoration patterns, traces of burrs and deliberate mistakes are conceptually controlled marks of traditional manufacturing, and they hardly look like the traditional marks that should refer to ingenuity of the maker. The avant-garde even believes that renewal of applications of crafts cannot be expected from the traditional adherents, because they do not question the whys and wherefores of the technique itself. To the newcomers these particular questions are crucial: only if concept, function and context demand a craft approach, one opts for a specialised technique. They are uninhibited by lack of expertise, which they owe a great deal to institutes like European Ceramic Work Centre (EKWC) in Den Bosch, the glass factory in Leerdam and the museum of textile in Tilburg. EKWC especially has encouraged emancipation of the ceramic discipline by being accessible when it concerns expertise. EKWC’s friendly approach disturbs many traditional ceramists. It is not a coincidence, that a recent

discussion about why ceramic and glass departments in art schools cannot simply be called workshops has restarted. The argument of the traditional side remains always the same: the expertise should be protected fiercely, which calls for a lot of attention, money and care, and in order to do so specialised departments are essential. Strangely enough there has hardly been an investigation of whether well-equipped workshops with a staff of experienced specialists would not better suit the contemporary art and design practice. Then the art schools would train artists and designers who may (or may not) have used of traditional techniques instead of training a separate group of ceramists and glass artists.

Crafts Restored

The reviving interest in crafts can be explained as a logical reaction to globalisation. However, the industrialisation process spinning out of control has contributed to this development to a great extent as well. Industry has made good design available for the public. On the other hand it has also made redundant boring disposables mainly characterised by unimaginative uniformity. This is, ironically, enhanced by the most important quality of the industrial product, namely the fastness with which it renews itself. Materials and products are constantly being innovated; traditions are born as quick as a flash. It seems as if everything is happening at the same time, NOW, without having a past. Terms like old and new have become relative concepts and the frame of reference we used to attach to these words is no longer relevant. Liberated from aggravating connotations -- like regression, nostalgia, smugness -- crafts can now be assessed at its qualitative and effective merits. Even obsolete activities like casting bronze figures, knitting and embroidery have become fashionable provided that they are appropriately dealt with. Paradoxically, the scope of production possibilities has not been extended by industrial process only, but also by rediscovered old methods and techniques. It is remarkable that the interest in traditional trade is reviving at this moment, because it does not look like the pastiche, irony and disturbance of post-modernism, which was in vogue in the design world for a short while. A new creed was not born nor was there a definite breach with the modernistic austerity that had basically never left The Netherlands. In the beginning, conceptual design linked up closely with the plain dictates of form of Modernism. However, the connection between these two is questionable, as conceptual design seems to agree with extravagant design and marks of traditional manufacturing as well provided that function and concept give a reason to this.

Furthermore, we should realise something else. Regretfully, and despite all illusions, we know now that only a small group of people at the top of the market appreciate avant-garde design irrespective of industrial or traditional manufacturing, whether cheap or expensive. The Bauhaus designers, too, had to admit this, when their plain and cheaply manufactured furniture was not bought by the target group, that is underpaid workers, but by highly educated and well-paid design lovers. In 2004, cheap production is no longer an essential part of a

design philosophy for most designers, although quality is. And it does not really matter how these standards of quality are achieved, which means that time and energy consuming production processes are acceptable once again: the taboo has vanished.

Did the worlds of crafts and the avant-garde come closer to each other? Not at all. Basically, the differences are still the same. The beauty of outstanding skill remains the most important standard in traditional crafts, which is hardly an issue in art and design. In other fields technique is not the major quality standard either. Maria Callas, according to the experts, sang slightly out of tune. It must have been awful for her competitors to witness her growing popularity -- though they should have known that passion and beauty can benefit from a wrong note at the right time. It is similar to the practice of contemporary art and design, which prioritises the impact of ideas and images over their technical realisation. What counts is the story and the kitsch in Hans van Bentem's images, the sacred character of Thom Puckey's work, the coincidence and the banal traces of the making process in the works of Hella Jongerius, Dick van Hoff and Joris Laarman, the fragile quality of Jan Broekstra's china disposables and the vase by Frank Tjepkema and Peter van der Jagt, the clash of materials of Gijs Bakker's teapot, Marcel Wanders' knotted chair and Hil Driessen's fabric designs, Arnoud Visser's unorthodox applications of materials, the decorations of Ineke Hans' furniture, Wieke Somers' vases, and Job Smeet's bronze spoons whose weight is burdened with history and are ironically named Craft.