

THE DECLINE OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

By H. R. PERCY

TRUE craftsmanship is akin to art—is, indeed, functional art—and one of the most lamentable features of industrial progress is the ever-widening rift between art and craft, by which the craftsman becomes at best the executor of another's design, and at worst, the slave of mass-production. In almost every craft the story is one of decline. The achievements of modern industry are achievements not of individual craftsmanship, but of collective effort by a multitude of specialists. This process is reflected not only in the quality of the artisan and his work, but in the nature of his training. To satisfy the voracious appetite of mass-production, the producers must themselves be mass-produced.

The golden age of craftsmanship seems to have come and gone with the mediaeval Craft Gilds in western Europe. Then, the artisan plied his skill under his own roof for the benefit of a small community, and passed it on as a precious heritage to his son or to a single indentured apprentice, who would in his turn become an independent master-craftsman. Then existed the ideal condition of craftsmanship, which is a static condition. They worked their whole lives long with the same materials, the same tools, the same facilities, and any improvements they evolved were true and fundamental improvements—improvements in skill and manual technique. The majority of craftsmen were, literally, born craftsmen. Their training was a process of assimilation over a long period, during which they acquired dexterity as naturally as they acquired speech. And while they learned the craft they were formed by it, absorbing its philosophy and its tacit moral code.

The moral aspect of craftsmanship cannot be overstressed. The early Gilds were preoccupied with it. They were concerned chiefly with prestige, knowing instinctively, as Ruskin knew, that "if your fee is first with you, and your work second, fee is your master, and the lord of fee, who is the Devil." On this sound tenet they nurtured their apprentices, insisting above all on pride of craftsmanship, and the production of a good job at a fair price.

Their work was first with them: it was their life. How many can say as much today? The apprentices of those days emerged with a sense of obligation; emerged married to their

craft, having learned not only to do their work, but to love and enjoy the doing. For this is the essence of true craftsmanship; and it follows from this that the essence of good teaching is the stimulation of interest, the awakening of that love of perfection without which all work becomes an irksome duty, performed grudgingly for the sake of monetary reward.

The first enemy to enter the field against good craftsmanship was human greed. With the growth of large towns and the resulting expansion of industry, the merchant came increasingly between the artisan and the public. The inevitable consequence was that in the absence of personal contact, fee assumed priority over work, and fidelity declined. One evil effect was that master-craftsmen tended to indenture more apprentices than they could properly train, or industry could absorb.

The Gilds countered this by imposing limitations upon the number of apprentices employed. The Slaters' Gild of Newcastle, England, decreed that a second apprentice must not be indentured until the first had entered the last year of his training. Other Gilds ruled that three journeymen must be employed for every apprentice under training. This was equally effective, since journeymen were paid, while in the great majority of cases apprentices were not.

But in time the Gilds themselves succumbed to corruption. They became exclusive in the worst sense, resenting not only the rivalry of outsiders, but that of their own discharged apprentices. The apprentice, unless he was the son of a master-craftsman, had little hope of eventual independence, and was condemned to remain a journeyman in another's employ for the rest of his life.

In this lay the seed of the second evil, the evil of hired labour. This is evil not in itself, but in its effects: the danger in this instance arising from the changed attitude of master and apprentice toward each other and toward the training contracted between them; for the survival of good craftsmanship demanded now that the master must be not only a skilled craftsman, but also a wise, benevolent and in every way exemplary employer of labour. His apprentice was no longer a potential peer, but a potential servant.

There had been set in motion that deplorable process of transition from a state in which the craft was carried proudly through life as a privilege, a talent to be improved and passed on, to one in which it became a burden to be borne reluctantly for the sake of mere subsistence. Craftsmanship was losing for-

ever the freedom of a domestic, and was entering the bondage of an industrial economy.

The 'Industrial Revolution', when it came, swept the ranks of craftsmanship like a plague, killing many crafts at a stroke and leaving countless others moribund. Production went on, it is true, but the spirit had departed, supplanted by the spectre of starvation. Craftsmen had become 'tradesmen', and the pawns of trade. Apprentices in those industries to which mechanization came early were less than labourers, bound, many of them, to trades which might well become obsolete before they had mastered them; or were developing so rapidly as to be incapable of mastery, in the sense in which the elder craftsmen understood the word. It has been said that no teacher can properly further the cause of education unless he knows the sort of world for which his student is to be fitted, and this is nowhere more true than in the crafts, which a comparatively minor invention can revolutionize or render superfluous overnight. It is probable that many youngsters entered into an apprenticeship bright with promise, and became at its termination no more than the operators of the machines which had supplanted them.

Few apprentices today regard proficiency in their trade as the ultimate scope of ambition. It is looked upon, in one sense, as a proof of failure, since to have mastered the trade is to have missed the tide of promotion. The craftsman's bench is a stagnant backwater into which no ambitious apprentice wishes to be cast. It is for him a mere transitional stage on the road to higher things—design, research, management—and in consequence he attaches greater importance to the passing of examinations and to the assimilation of technical theory, than to the acquisition of practical skill. And who will blame him? His instinctive desire is to create, and creation is no longer the concern of the tradesman. He sees craftsmanship deprived of all its virtues but those of patience and precision, which, divorced from the compensating virtue of imagination, are negative virtues. When he discovers that he has not the aptitude—or the luck—required for promotion to the higher grades of industry, it is not unnatural that the young craftsman should return to his tools biassed and resentful. His skill can lead him nowhere, and the application of it yields him but scant satisfaction: for the craftsman's hand, which once was a sublime instrument of creation, has degenerated into a mere insensate link between mind and machine.

Exceptions there are, inevitably. We find instances of miraculous survival among archaic crafts, kept alive, it seems, by the sheer tenacity of their hold upon the sentiments of the people. But even these—the masons, the thatchers, the coopers, the engravers, saddlers, potters, glasscutters and the rest—attract a diminishing stream of apprentices, and are doomed. Luxury has kept them alive, and with the age of luxury they will vanish, despite all the protests and the endeavours of the dilettante and the sentimentalist.

What, then, of the craftsman of tomorrow? The probability is that he will not exist, as we know him. There comes upon us an age in which that which cannot be accomplished by mechanical means will not be attempted, except by the amateur. Mechanization, which man undertook for the sake of economic advantage, he is now forced to continue from sheer economic necessity. The craftsman is being squeezed out, and such of his functions as remain are being divided between the technician and the mechanic. The training of apprentices today incorporates both these aspects of industry. At the conclusion of his training the apprentice is faced with the choice between them. He can elect to use the skill of his hands in the manipulation of machines, or he can aspire to apply his craftsman's imagination to the problems of design. He perhaps comes nearest to knowing the satisfaction of the old-time craftsman when he has mastered both, although he cannot practice them simultaneously.

It seems likely that the craftsman will become more and more preoccupied with design, and less and less with production; and if this surmise is true his future may not, after all, be without promise. A new dawn shines, faint and sickly, as yet, habingered in that new but already common phrase 'Industrial Design', which testifies to an increasing awareness that art is not a frill, but a basic principle.