

Book Review by Kate Wilson***The Invention of Craft***

Glenn Adamson

256 pages

Bloomsbury Academic

In an attempt to consider craft at the cutting edge of creative production in this new era of the postdisciplinary, *The Invention of Craft* by Glenn Adamson looks to the past to reconsider how craft has adapted to change and, subsequently, serves as a role model for the contemporary practitioner. Intended as a sequel to his previous book, *Thinking Through Craft*, in which he sought to consider craft's position in the context of recent art history and its place within it, *The Invention of Craft* continues the discussion but with a revised perspective shifting the focus from art history to the much broader context of modern methods of production. Considering studio practice and the factory made, with fine art taking a bit of a back seat (although not too much of one), Adamson explores the historical relationship between craft and industry, questioning ways in which it may inform and be replicated in contemporary craft practice.

The backdrop to Adamson's discussion is the period between 1750 and 1850, a time of intense industrialization, innovation, technological and social development in the western world, but which, he suggests, was also one of developing craft skills and ingenuity. He challenges the standard maxim that craft was continually under threat from industry, asserting that craft *itself* is a modern invention and that craft and industry were in many ways interdependent rather than oppositional; not only the necessary *other* from which to define themselves but in its infancy, industrialization actually relied upon craft expertise and workshop systems to provide the 'tools of the trade'. His discussion begins with guild based production in the late 18th century and the steady process of de-constructing the magic and mystery of craft skills, and concludes with the Great Exhibition of 1851, described by Adamson 'as the key moment of nineteenth-century industrial history' and the point at which values and attitudes to production changed, resulting in a widespread *rethinking of skill*. In this context creative thinking and production challenged perceptions of authorship, process and agency, something he considers as happening

currently in this new era of the postdisciplinary and which he identifies as a *reinvention* of skill.

Through the analysis of pre 1850 methods of production Adamson explores this relationship between craft and industry over 4 chapters, alliteratively titled 'Manipulation', 'Mystery', 'Mechanical' and 'Memory'. As a framework for discussion each chapter follows a similar pattern and chronology; introductory anecdotes set the scene for further theoretical discussion on specific historical developments, from which he creates a conceptual framework to develop his thoughts on the implication it may have for craft practice in its contemporary context. In the process he attempts to demythologize the pre-industrial romanticism of Morris and Ruskin, that of the marginalized noble craftsman, and to some extent un-demonize notions of railroading industrialism, suggesting much of it was far less confrontational and agitated than popularly assumed.

Adamson challenges the perceived oppositional relationship that (modern) craft has historically had with industry as being rooted in the past; an antithetical stance he frequently reiterates, the notion of craft being anti modern. The chapter 'Mechanical' suggests craft's distancing from art manifested in the development of technically correct drawings, forms of instruction, more aligned with industry as opposed to the expression of ideas through 'art type' drawing. The ability to draw an accurate design, according to Adamson, emphasized the awareness of the difference between art and craft and implied un-creativity of the latter. Throughout the book he underlines several historical issues that impact on the perception of craft but here he raises the question of what makes a good craftsman and is, in my opinion, the nub of the discussion. Traditional attitude is one that implies someone who can reproduce something well but as Adamson points out, the problem with this notion is its lack of perceived creativity, 'It is premised upon the *absence* of originality' (p142). This is not an historical issue; it is still a point of discussion, not only with craft commentators, but also hotly contested amongst practitioners. Within the world of ceramics hierarchies of skills sets are still prevalent between those who throw, those who hand build and those who, God forbid, cast, oh, and not forgetting those who chop up bits of ceramic and glue them back together again; the

cultural divide between those who practice to perfect a process and those whose production is driven by idea is still too wide. One only has to look at the responses to *Ceramic Review*'s recent survey asking for the type of articles people want to read to see how multifarious in attitude (and frequently self defeatist) makers with clay can be- perhaps there are similar divisions within the ranks of other craft disciplines. Another issue Adamson identifies is the dual nature of craft, the facilitator of the intentions of others as well as remaining 'a complex domain of integrated knowledge in its own right', it being either 'supportive' or 'transformative' (p172).

Glenn Adamson is arguably the leading voice of contemporary craft theory in Britain; his eloquent style, engaging in its confident and assured manner, stands apart from others in its constructive objectivity and positivity. This is a book rich in craft history, which endeavours to unpick traditional perceptions by positioning the roots of modern craft alongside the development of the industrial revolution and it makes for good reading. There is a clear logic to his discussion, well considered and theoretically qualified. I'm not sure I learnt anything earth shatteringly new, as I think most readers would feel if they were fairly well read in this area; to paraphrase Eric Morecambe, perhaps we know all the facts but not necessarily all in the same order. Reinvention is surely nothing new in craft or art and is something we readily accept and (some) strive for, but Adamson is basically stating that, in the modern context, the example of postdisciplinarity has been at the margins of art and craft production forever.

'Innovation.... is often not a matter of creating a work; rather, it is a matter of inventing a whole new way of working' (p33).

As the art world looks beyond the ready-mades to the intimacy of the craft object, the acquisition is the utilizing of another's skill and authorship belongs to the co-ordinator. Adopting (or hijacking) craft processes in the production of art not only feeds into a universal language, but it also brings with it an alternative dialect, speaking differently to the senses; accessible and familiar, mnemonic and nostalgic, creating new avenues and layers of meaning. Adamson frequently references Alfred Gell and quotes him saying 'craft is the origin and ultimate signifier of material potency' (p104), a reminder that craft

still has the power to confound. Juxtaposition of the familiar with the uncanny is also not a new phenomenon, but it is a useful tool for analysis and one actively pursued by the postdisciplinary in the desire for innovation.

Adamson is putting into words what has been done in practice for some time now, exploring ideas behind materiality, process, skill and application, breaching the threshold between the cross and post-disciplinary. He also acknowledges the lack of direction within craft based institutions and the threat of increasingly limited access to studios and facilities. I may be overly cynical but by adopting the umbrella ideology of the postdisciplinary within art and design education, are we not just supplying a noose to hang the neck of expensive craft based learning? The less we can define ourselves the quicker we will disappear. Will penetrating the hallowed quarters of the art world be the next stage of our reinvention and subsequent sustainability or is it the death knell of higher craft based education?

Adamson is right to keep banging the drum loudly in relation to the status of craft and its potential for reinvention-lets just hope it is not in ever decreasing circles, particularly at a time when the current government is attempting to reclassify craft as *non-creative*! ¹

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/classifying-and-measuring-the-creative-industries-consultation-on-proposed-changes>