

Putting the Art into Craft: *The Craftsman's Art* exhibition, 1973

The 1970s were a unique period for craft in Britain, as both practice and idea, were said to be experiencing a significant renaissance. Sharing points of commonality with the craft revival of the nineteenth century Arts and Crafts movement, the 1970s craft revival gave impetus to a new generation of craftspeople and crafts businesses. What is often overlooked however, is the important role played by government institutions, which through their support and promotion of craft, attempted to redefine and shape its identity, as part of a wider political and ideological agenda.

This paper will focus on the creation of the Crafts Advisory Committee (CAC) in 1971, and its flagship exhibition, *The Craftsman's Art*, held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 1973. The CAC, (renamed the Crafts Council in 1979) was a state supported, centralized body with overall responsibility for the development and management of craft activity in Britain. As an organization today, the Crafts Council continues to play a key role in how the crafts in Britain are supported and defined.

The importance of the CAC with respect to this paper is that from its inception, it chose to align itself with 'fine art' by focusing its attentions specifically on high-end studio craft rather than vernacular, traditional or amateur crafts. This ideological stance was boldly manifested in the title of *The Craftsman's Art* exhibition at the V&A which was timed to coincide with the launch of the bi-monthly magazine *Crafts* (still in circulation). You will see the cover of the first edition of *Crafts* here. In comparison to the fine arts, crafts at this time had been 'virtually neglected by central government'. The formation of the CAC would dramatically reverse this position. Crucially, the CAC did not receive funding from the Board of Trade as with previous crafts organizations, but from the Arts Branch of the Department of Education, freeing it from any obligations to industry.

The CAC's remit was to establish a position of greater prominence for the crafts nationally, and to specifically champion the 'artist craftsman'. This was a significant ideological shift, adopted by the state to distance craft from previous associations with industry. The CAC borrowed from, and aligned itself with, the institutional recognition and power of fine art in a bid to achieve greater prominence. It was believed that this new funding structure and central organization would not only unite 'a number of different voices' which comprised the crafts, but also improve the quality of craft and promote national interests. When queried about the definition of 'artist craftsman', Paymaster General with Responsibility for the Arts, Lord Eccles replied: 'there are craftsmen whose work really equals that of any artist in what one might describe as fine arts; there are others who are really very near industrial producers. Our intention is to go for high quality first'. Craftsmen were now being recognised alongside painters, sculptors, composers and writers for their cultural contribution to society, a highly significant shift.

The CAC dealt with grants and loans, commissioning and patronage, exhibitions, publications and publicity, as well as conservation projects and training. The CAC's efforts to reinvigorate the crafts, are evidenced in their tax free bursary scheme, which allocated a generous £2000 to makers (equivalent to £20,000 today). By April 1974, grants of over £140,000 had been allocated to craftsmen and organizations across Britain. A selective index, 'Craftsmen of Quality', was published in 1976, to encourage the commissioning of high value craft objects, underlining the CAC's aspirations towards excellence and status.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the CAC in terms of elevating craft to the status of fine art was the introduction of *Crafts* magazine and *The Craftsman's Art* exhibition. Both were crucial in terms

of establishing a new identity for craft in the 1970s. They also underlined the significance of institutional support in defining and shaping perceptions of craft in Britain at this time.

The bi-monthly magazine, *Crafts*, was launched in March 1973. Timed to coincide with the opening of *The Craftsman's Art* exhibition later that month, its initial print run of 10,000 sold out during the exhibition. *Crafts* magazine was noticeably different to other art magazines of the period. Its style was celebratory and modern, containing high quality photographs and profiles of contemporary makers engaging with 'the new crafts'. Keen to distance itself from subject matter that might be considered traditional or backward looking, *Crafts* magazine's message was all about the future. The magazine's content directly mirrored the CAC's rhetoric, as documented in their manifesto:

Whilst tradition and the sense of continuity have a part to play, they should not be allowed to take precedence over individual creativity, nor should they divert the artist craftsman from making a response to the modern world.

This CAC's emphasis on individual creativity and engagement with modernity was clearly demonstrated by the image chosen for the front cover of the first issue of *Crafts*: a colourful and contemporary quilted embroidery by textile artist Judith Lewis. Quilting was a craft medium previously associated with sewing bees and female domesticity. Lewis's work was by contrast an exuberant explosion of youthful individuality. The work reflected the feminist art practice of challenging fine art boundaries by engaging with traditionally gendered media. As such, it perfectly embodied the contemporary qualities of 'artist craftsman' that the CAC wanted to promote.

The work of silversmith Michael Rowe also featured in this first edition of *Crafts*, and equally defied conventional notions of what craft might be. His two foot high copper spice pomander, with sweeping staircases and arched niches, reminiscent of an M.C. Escher drawing, was described by *Crafts* as 'moving beyond the accepted confines of the craft, and into the realms of sculpture, architecture and even landscape'. The editorial content of *Crafts* further underlined the CAC's ideology, favouring the 'artist craftsperson' as a highly creative, pioneering individual, as opposed to the skills-based and reactionary, 'traditional craftsman'.

The CAC also set about organising national exhibitions, intended to change public attitudes by introducing them to the new, fine art crafts. The first, and arguably most impactful, was *The Craftsman's Art* in 1973. Underlining just how extraordinary this exhibition was for its time, cultural critic Christopher Frayling wrote:

The visitor to this exhibition might have wondered whether 'The Craftsman's Art' had anything to do with the concept of 'the crafts' as commonly understood.

This was of course the intention. The exhibition organisers were highly selective, from an initial trawl of almost 8,000 objects from 1,700 craftspeople, a final cut to 507 objects from 265 makers across Britain was made.

The public response to the exhibition was very positive. The private view alone 'defeated all efforts to count the guests queuing along the galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum'. Lectures by leading authors and critics were given, such as architectural theorist Professor Reyner Banham, author of *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1971), and craft historian Fiona MacCarthy, who had recently published *All Things Bright and Beautiful: British Design 1830 to Today* (1972). The exhibition was visited by 56,000 people, including HRH Prince Philip, Princess Margaret and the Earl of Snowden, as well as Prime Minister Edward Heath. Over £8,000 of sales were generated, with some craftsmen claiming that the exhibition 'brought them enough work for three years or more'. National press

coverage was also enthusiastic, crediting the exhibition with providing a focus to the 'strong but undirected interest in the crafts among the public'.

The catalogue for the exhibition provided some historical context to the type of crafts exhibited, as well as essays about the different craft processes, a glossary and an index with makers' addresses. It was designed by Pentagram, an exciting new design consultancy in London, with photography by fine art photographer, Enzo Ragazzini, giving the catalogue:

... a sophistication and modernity which reflected the feeling of the exhibition and surprised those who connected craft only with the supposed charms of the retrospective and amateur.

In this short paper, it has been demonstrated that as a government institution, the CAC played a crucial role in shaping the identity of craft in 1970s, by choosing to align it with 'fine art' and focusing its attentions on high-end studio craft rather than vernacular, traditional or amateur crafts. This was evident from the naming of its first major exhibition, *The Craftsman's Art*. Through its generous funding schemes, exhibitions and the launch of a high-profile magazine, *Crafts*, the CAC was directly responsible for shaping and enabling the British craft revival of the 1970s. In terms of elevating the status of craft, legitimising it in professional spheres, and introducing new ways of making, theorising, and exhibiting craft, the legacy of the CAC, *The Craftsman's Art* exhibition, and the establishment of *Crafts* magazine, can therefore not be underestimated.