

“Craftwork is not the ‘easy’ option”

INTERVIEW ON THE OCCASION OF THE EUROPEAN ARTISTIC
CRAFTS DAYS “EUROPÄISCHE TAGE DES KUNSTHANDWERKS”
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ZDH: *Professor Trevor Marchand, you’ve studied architecture and are an Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology. Later you completed an apprenticeship in woodworking. What would you say to young people today if they preferred to do a vocational training in a craft instead of a corresponding university degree?*

Trevor Marchand: Firstly, I would say, follow your heart. But, be mindful that craftwork is not the ‘easy’ option. It demands dedication, perseverance and steadfast belief in your potential to create, make and repair things. In many crafts, gaining the very basic skills can be achieved in just a few years of focussed training and repeated practice. But, becoming proficient and attaining mastery is a lifetime journey. The possibilities for continuous learning, improvement and personal growth are limitless.

By its very nature, craftwork demands that you be inquisitive. It draws upon know-how and knowledge from diverse disciplines. Design and making involve mathematics and geometry, a little chemistry and material science, as well as physics and engineering for producing objects that are both functional and aesthetic. Craftspeople must also take into account human anatomy and ergonomics when considering how hands and bodies will interact with the things they produce. Familiarity with the history of a trade fosters appreciation for its traditions and guides meaningful innovation. A sociological approach is critical to understanding the changing tastes and aspirations of clientele. Environmental and ecological awareness informs greener and safer practice. And, a grasp of economics, finance, accounting and marketing is essential for operating a successful craft business.

From the moment you embark on a career in craftwork, cultivate patience. Reconceptualise the mistakes you make as opportunities, embrace challenge and discover the pleasure in problem solving. Problem solving is at the heart of all the activities you will engage in as a craftsman: from design and making to getting your goods to market and out into the world.

Finally, treat your body and your hands with respect and always practice safely. Your livelihood depends heavily on your mobility, dexterity and acute perception.

ZDH. You are an anthropologist. What is your special interest in craftwork?

Trevor Marchand: Since childhood, I delighted in taking things apart and putting them together. Later, as an architect, I immersed myself in the ‘craft’ of technical drawing and creating space on paper. I also enjoyed working things out on construction sites with the contractors and tradespeople. Intrigue with the activities of tradespeople grew. In particular, I wanted to better understand how they translated my often-complex drawings into buildings; the ways they communicated with one another with often-limited verbal exchange, and the ways that novices learned their skills by watching and imitating.

With a grant from the Canadian International Development Agency, I carried out my first formal study with mud-brick masons in Northern Nigeria. That was followed by a PhD in social anthropology, which allowed me to address the many questions I had about the nature of skill learning within apprenticeship frameworks. Doctoral fieldwork took me to Yemen, where I spent a year as a labourer working alongside a team of traditional minaret builders. Subsequent studies returned me to West Africa, but this time to the historic town of Djenné (Mali) to work with mud masons. Having discovered similarities as well as important differences between these apprenticeship systems, I felt it was time to examine craft training in a European context. I therefore signed up to the two-year fine woodwork programme at the Building Crafts College in London to study enskilment within a formal institutional setting.

ZDH: When working with their hands, many immediately feel the positive energy on the mind. Why do prejudices against craftspeople and a craftsman's vocational training persist so stubbornly?

Trevor Marchand: You are absolutely correct. Many craftspeople I've worked with speak about ‘being in the zone’ and experiencing a satisfying sense of ‘control’ over their wellbeing and their immediate environment when engaged hands-on in their trade. Nevertheless, there is a persistent fiction in European and North American societies that handicraft is ‘mindless’ work and that vocational training is for those less academically gifted.

That fiction is rooted in two artificial divisions. The first is that made between ‘mind and body’, which is commonly traced back to the seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes, but has much earlier beginnings in the writings of ancient Greek philosophers. The second is the separation made between ‘culture and nature’. As a result, it is supposed that ‘work of the mind’ generates ideas, theories and institutions, which are both enduring and the bedrock of ‘culture’, while ‘work of the hand’ is thought to produce only perishable utilitarian objects. The functional, material and ‘earthy’ qualities of

handcrafted objects are, like the body, popularly correlated with 'nature', and thereby somehow made subservient to 'higher' culture.

Directly related to this, Western capitalist economies are increasingly fuelled by their financial and service sectors, while manufacturing – along with the associated noise, dirt and pollution – has been progressively outsourced, typically to poorer nations. This geographic and socioeconomic partitioning has exacerbated the divide between mind-work and handwork, thereby reinforcing an existing hierarchy of status.

ZDH: What can you do about it?

Trevor Marchand: In order to create a more level playing field that unites work of the mind with that of the body, nothing short of radical change is needed to the ways that we understand and define 'intelligence'. Research in anthropology, educational studies, philosophy, the cognitive and neurosciences and other disciplines is in fact demonstrating the indissoluble connection of mind-body. Longitudinal ethnographic studies of craftwork, like the ones I've carried out in West Africa, Arabia and the UK, reveal the multiple kinds of knowledge and the deep intelligence that goes into making things well. Academic findings about the intelligent body, however, need to be more widely disseminated if there is to be real change in home attitudes, media representations, government policy and, crucially, the classroom curriculum.

The driving aim of my writing and documentary filmmaking is to raise awareness among curriculum specialists of the existing research on skill and skilled perception, embodied cognition and communication, and the evolutionary relationship between our brain, hands and the tools that we use. I believe resolutely that hands-on problem solving must be fluidly integrated in schooling, from kindergarten onward. The activities of assembling and disassembling, design and making, and experimenting and testing should be integral to a rounded education that nurtures muscles, morals and mind in equal measure. Hands-on engagement sutures theory with practice, and it grounds knowledge in the intricate ecological environment of which we, as humans, are a part. Significantly, making and problem solving empower individuals with creativity and confidence to positively transform their own world, and the world of others.

ZDH: Your latest book is titled: „The Pursuit of Pleasurable Work: Craftwork in 21st century England“. Please give us a sneak peek: How is the current situation of craftwork in England?

Trevor Marchand: My objective as both an anthropologist and craftsman is to promote not only a global appreciation for the dexterity, creativity and intelligence that lay at the heart of craftwork, but also a progressive reevaluation of handwork as a vehicle for

individual fulfilment and wellbeing. *The Pursuit of Pleasurable Work* is therefore a book about the quest for a better way of living and a passionate retort to the dehumanising trend of deskilling in the classroom and the workplace.

Against the backdrop of an alienating, technologizing and ever-accelerating world of mass production, my book tells an intimate story: one about a community of fine woodworkers and furniture makers training at an historic institution in London's East End during the present-day 'renaissance of craftsmanship'. I offer animated and scholarly accounts of individual and shared learning experiences, achievements, utopian aspirations and challenges that reveal the deep human desire to create with our hands, the persistent longing for meaningful work, and the struggles to realise that dream. The chapters supply penetrating insights into the rich socio-political history of craftwork in England; the nature of embodied skill and problem solving in design and making; the brain-hand-tool nexus, and strategies for reconfiguring skilled practices as we age. In combination, my discoveries and the revelations of my fellow woodworkers speak volumes to the vast field of contemporary craft, as well as to craft's past and its possible futures in a troubled world.

ZDH: *Who did you write this book for?*

Trevor Marchand: While writing the book, I kept multiple audiences in mind. These centrally included the communities of craftspeople I have come to know over the past three decades; my fellow anthropologists of skill, cognition and the body; sociologists of work and learning; historians of apprenticeship and vocational training, and educationalists. My arguments are targeted primarily at those vested with authority to make the kinds of necessary transformations to our educational curricula discussed earlier, but at parents, too, who influence the worldviews and career choices of their children. Very importantly, I have also written this book for the general reader interested in 'what it is to be human', and who, themselves, may be in pursuit of pleasurable, more fulfilling work.

ZDH: *You conducted independent field research with mud masons in Northern Nigeria, did an apprenticeship with a team of mud-brick masons in Mali and minaret builders in Yemen. Afterwards you wrote books about apprenticeship and knowledge in practice. What did you learn about learning?*

Trevor Marchand: Some of what I learned has already surfaced in answers to previous questions, but I can briefly add a few other key observations. Learning flourishes within communities of practice: in the interaction, dialogue and collaborative efforts to explore options and figure things out.

In craftwork, there is rarely, if ever, a single solution to a problem or just one way to achieve it. Successful learning environments are those that scaffold trainees in exploring beyond their current ability; license experimentation in design and with materials and tools and encourage students to turn mistakes into opportunities for improvement. These are transferrable skills that enable practitioners to grow in self-sufficiency and self-respect. Because craftwork comprises a wide range of skilled knowledge, 'mastery' may be defined as the abilities to dynamically orchestrate those various ways of knowing in response to changing circumstances, arising challenges and 'surprises', and to nimbly improvise suitable methods and apposite solutions while maintaining the flow of work. Embodied communication plays a seminal role in practice-based contexts. Motor cognition (i.e. those parts of our brain and nervous system dedicated to instantiating and coordinating movement) is the basis for both generating what we do and interpreting the postures, gestures and activities that others perform. Skill learning is therefore grounded in the intelligent body.

ZDH: From your experience of a range of different apprenticeship situations, which is the best one?

Trevor Marchand: Each of the apprenticeship systems and training programmes I studied and participated in had its merits and flaws.

An advantage of those in Yemen and Mali was that the construction site was also the 'classroom'. Young men therefore learned not only how to build, but also how to manage projects. By regularly witnessing the communications and negotiations between their masters and fellow craftspeople, suppliers of materials, city officials and clients, they learned how to comport themselves professionally. Conversations, banter and storytelling familiarised them with the lore of their craft and the history of their towns. All team members partook in the delegation of tasks and they became versed in methods for motivating fellow workers or imposing discipline when necessary. Importantly, they became practiced in collaborative teamwork and in sharing disappointment when things went wrong and victory upon completing tasks together.

In Yemen, the men sang choruses of *hajl*, or traditional work songs, which served to alleviate the monotony of repetitive tasks as well as physical strains. *Hajl* also brought coordinated rhythm to collective tasks. However, Yemeni apprentices who attempted to progress beyond their station too quickly were reprimanded or demoted, and asking direct questions to the masters was perceived as a challenge to authority. Typically, this was not the case on the Malian building sites, where the hierarchy was less rigid, apprentices enjoyed relative security, the community of masons was tighter and organised as a guild, and the possibilities for motivated individuals to advance in the trade were greater.

In the woodworking shop at the College in London, posing questions, and even challenging the ideas of instructors, was expected of trainees. They were also expected to possess key literacy and numeracy skills, and they sat formal examinations. In the absence of real daily workplace issues, students had ample time to be fully immersed ‘in the tools’ at their workbench. That allowed for a more accelerated pace of enskilment in comparison to apprentices in Yemen and Mali. However, like the majority of institutional-based craft programmes, the business of establishing and running a workshop was a peripheral element in the curriculum. This meant that most graduates with aspirations for being self-employed had first to seek employment with firms in order to gain that necessary know-how. I’m pleased to add that, with time and perseverance, several of my fellow woodwork trainees succeeded in becoming entrepreneurial joiners and furniture makers.

ZDH: Please allow us a personal question: You have trained as a furniture maker and you once said: “I think that I’ve always felt torn. I’ve always thought of myself as a maker and it’s probably still my greatest pleasure.” Is there a piece of craftwork that you particularly enjoyed making?

Trevor Marchand: During my two years at the Building Crafts College, I learned to design and make architectural joinery and furniture. Although I still frequently engage in carpentry and joinery for my own needs, I am not presently making furniture. This is due mainly to the high cost of the milling machinery required, which I cannot justify unless (or until) I dedicate my full time and resources to making furniture commercially. When I am not researching and writing, much of my creative energy is vested in my garden and orchard.

While at the College, the piece of furniture I most enjoyed creating was my ‘Djenné’ chair. The design was inspired by the big, cosy Morris chair in our sitting room and by the soft sinuous contours of the Great mud Mosque in Djenné, Mali, where I had spent considerable time as an anthropologist and building labourer. The chair was made with sustainably-sourced oak, assembled with straightforward joinery, and finished with a homebrew of olive oil and freshly-squeezed lemon juice. Producing the reclining back and hand-shaping the curved components of the armrests posed memorable challenges. My sister-in-law kind-heartedly made the upholstered cushions, and so, pleurably, the chair was also a collaborative project.

Trevor H. J. Marchand is author of the book:
“The Pursuit of Pleasurable Work. Craftwork in 21st Century England”
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