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The Craftsman and Education in the Progressive Era

Abstract

The Craftsman was a periodical published in the United States from 1901-1916. The magazine was dedicated to promoting the artistic and socialistic ideals of the Arts & Crafts Movement and its founder, William Morris. This article analyzes the progressive nature of *The Craftsman* via the periodical's emphasis on bettering society through higher quality art and education as well as encouraging equality for women.

Keywords

arts and crafts movement, education, progressivism, craftsman, United Crafts, William Morris

The Craftsman and Education in the Progressive Era
Abigail J. Szunyogh

Art tends to reflect the issues of the times, and art at the turn of the twentieth century was no exception. From 1901-1916, the United Crafts Guild in Eastwood, New York published *The Craftsman* magazine every month. Heavily inspired by William Morris's Arts & Crafts movement in England during the latter half of the 19th century, *The Craftsman* was established with the goal of promoting both Morris's and art critic John Ruskin's artistic and socialistic principles. The guild prided itself on valuing beauty in design with efficiency in function, as well as encouraging artists to both design and construct their works. Although founded upon socialistic principles, *The Craftsman* was progressive in that it emphasized interventions aimed at societal improvement, particularly through the means of education.

The Craftsman appears to have been written with the intention of being accessible to a broad range of people with interest in art and culture. The periodical does appear to favor rural life over the cities, but it also contains articles addressing city life, particularly how to make it more enjoyable. The magazine includes articles written by women in addition to men, and addresses issues affecting both sexes. The main thread that ties *The Craftsman*'s audience together is the appreciation for art and the beautification of society in all respects—aesthetically, morally, socially and academically. There is something for everyone in The United Craft's monthly magazine.

In an increasingly industrialized society, the United Crafts Guild wanted to promote art created by high-skilled individuals rather than by low-skilled workers in an assembly-line fashion. However, although *The Craftsman* denounced industrialization and excessive consumption, the magazine also rejected the extravagant designs of the Victorian Era and did not reject industrialization completely. In November of 1902 Oscar Lovell Triggs introduced the idea of a "new industrialism," which combined art, education and labor.¹ By compounding the freedom of a studio, the community and instruction of a school, and the production and demand of a factory, the new workshop combined art and industry in a beneficial manner. In this way, the Arts and Crafts movement desired to return to the artistic methods of the medieval era, during which most art was created by guilds.

The craftsmen felt that industrialism took the pleasure out of life. By separating the designer and the workman into two roles, the designer could not enjoy the creation of his work nor could the workman enjoy creating something of

¹ Oscar Lovell Triggs, "The new industrialism," *The Craftsman*, vol. 3 (November 1902): 93-106.

his own design. The craftsmen were able to enjoy both sides of the art making process, whereas according to Triggs the only thing the workman had for motivation and pleasure was a possible increase in wages.² The craftsmen believed that factory-made art and furniture was heartless—only handicrafts presented truth in beauty and art, and it was part of the job of the craftsmen to educate fellow artists and art appreciators with that truth.³

While founded by an American Arts and Crafts guild, *The Craftsman* did not focus solely on American art and artists. With the increase in immigration and international trade thanks to industrialization, it had become much easier to be exposed to the art of other countries and cultures. Over time, the magazine published an increasing number of articles discussing artwork by foreign artists, connecting them to and exposing their influence on art in the United States. For example, in 1904 Heinrich Pudor cited modern industrial art as being heavily influenced by Japanese art, particularly their incorporation of nature and simplicity into everyday household objects.⁴

The public education system was also transforming during this period, and consequently *The Craftsman* discussed schooling frequently. Progressive education stressed the usefulness of hands-on learning rather than simply reading or listening.⁵ In his article “The School and the Life of the Child,” John Dewey described the democratic schoolroom and its virtues.⁶ *The Craftsman* emphasized the importance of adjusting the schools to accommodate the times as well; with the growth of industry came the need for children to learn new skill sets in order to function in society as adults. In addition, the magazine addressed the issue of eliminating the separation of girls and boys in the classroom. In the June 1911 issue, Marguerite Ogden Bigelow wrote about the new importance of educating America’s girls as well as boys.⁷ With the number of women entering the workforce increasing, it was important for girls to acquire the knowledge and skills required for a future in industry. Bigelow foresaw a future in which women as well as men would be needed in the workforce, and if a woman were incapable

2 Ibid., 96.

3 Caryl Coleman, “Art in industries and the outlook for the art student,” *The Craftsman*, vol. 2 (July 1902): 190-193.

4 Heinrich Pudor, “Thoughts upon modern industrial art,” *The Craftsman*, vol. 7 (August 1904): 508.

5 John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change* (New Brunswick, 2006), 102.

6 John Dewey, “The School and the Life of the Child,” in *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era*, edited by Leon Fink, (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2001), 356.

7 Marguerite Ogden Bigelow, “The girl of tomorrow and her education,” *The Craftsman*, vol. 20 (June 1911): 241-249.

of working in industrial life, she would most likely wind up on the streets and become a burden to society.⁸

In order to best prepare children for industrial society, according to Bigelow and Dewey, schools should offer training in specialized areas such as arts and trades, hygiene and academic classes.⁹ Bigelow also suggested that teachers should pay careful attention to the areas in which students show the most talent, and have parents encourage their children to hone these skills rather than force them into a profession which does not suit them.¹⁰ Once again, *The Craftsman* was promoting the idea that workers should be able to find enjoyment in their profession beyond their income. Just as artists in the Arts and Crafts movement desired their furniture and handicrafts to add aesthetic pleasure to common household items, they also wished for pleasure to be found in everyday life in general.

The democratic schoolroom also involved play time, and *The Craftsman* published an article in 1911 describing a school in Vineland, New Jersey which followed the ideals of the democratic schoolroom Dewey described. At this school, students were given individual instruction and play was incorporated into their regular curriculum, particularly in the form of excursions such as visits to the zoo and camping.¹¹ *The Craftsman* described this type of schooling as true education, as it allowed the stimulation of the child's imagination and "play-impulse," or desire to imitate.¹²

One might wonder why a magazine supposedly dedicated to Arts and Crafts would focus so much on education and America's school system. The reason is simple: in order to increase the appreciation for art, it was necessary to educate the public on the importance of high-quality art. By encouraging children to embrace art and an interest in culture, they would be more likely either to create art or to be interested in art as adults. The United Crafts Guild and associated artists desired most of all to continue their standard of quality handmade art in society, and felt the best way to encourage such creation was through education. Without a public appreciation for beauty in craftsmanship, there was no demand for masterfully created objects, making it impractical for workmen to make beautiful objects and still survive. Educating the masses was the key to the craftsmen's success. When *The Craftsman* was first created by the United Crafts Guild, it was founded on the principles of William Morris, one of

8 Ibid., 242-244.

9 Dewey, "Life of The Child," 356, and Bigelow, "The girl of tomorrow," 245-246.

10 Bigelow, "The girl of tomorrow," 245.

11 "A place where work means happiness," *The Craftsman* vol. 21 (October 1911): 84.

12 "In the children's world," *The Craftsman*, vol. 4, (September 1903): 492-498.

which was “the raising of the general intelligence of the workman, by the increase of his leisure and the multiplication of his means of culture and pleasure.”¹³ It is because of this principle that *The Craftsman* focuses on educating the masses about more than solely the subject of art.

The Craftsman also clearly supported the women’s movement which was growing at the time the periodical was being published. Many women were no longer satisfied with the inequality they were experiencing in America; they wished either to be treated as equal to or morally superior to men.¹⁴ As Victorian ideals were quickly evaporating, so was the segregation of men and women into separate spheres. More women were obtaining college educations, and it was becoming increasingly acceptable for women to work. However, women were generally still restricted to lower-paying jobs than men. *The Craftsman*, however, features many articles written by women and other articles praising female artists. In fact, Irene Sargent wrote the most articles in the entire history of the publication. In just the second year the magazine was published, the foreword of one of the volumes stated that the articles featured about female metalworkers would prove valuable to all those interested in metals. It goes on to say the value of the women’s work was “a sign of the times, hopeful and not to be disregarded, showing that the question of sex is relatively unimportant,” and the quality of the workmanship rather than the gender of the workman was what mattered most.¹⁵ Four of the seven articles in that volume were written by women.¹⁶

Similar to the many Progressives of the era, the writers for *The Craftsman* felt strongly about their mission to improve society. They wanted to expose the masses to better art and demonstrate how to live a better life. The honest beauty of hand-made art was not the only truth being preached throughout *The Craftsman*. Throughout the life of the publication, many articles were featured praising the virtues of farm life, proper education and leisure for children, and the role women played in society and the art world. While it may have seemed to be a mere art magazine, *The Craftsman* was actually quite representative of the United States in realms far beyond the arts. *The Craftsman* reflected viewpoints and social issues prevalent during the early 20th century in America through an artistic lens.

13 “Foreword,” *The Craftsman*, vol. 1 (October 1901): ii.

14 John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change* (New Brunswick, 2006): 94-100.

15 “Foreword,” *The Craftsman*, vol. 2 (May 1902): iii.

16 “Contents,” *The Craftsman*, 2 (May 1902), ii.