

The Work of the Hand

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For a number of years, craftsmanship and products that are hand crafted and hand-made have been valorised and claimed by a number of luxury brands. For example, in 2011 Hermès signed their advertising with the slogan “Artisan contemporain”, Louis Vuitton provided private tours of their special order workshops for clients and developed an advertising campaign using portraits of its craftsmen and women¹ (imitating the aesthetic of Dutch 17th century painting). In addition, a number of sectors of the industry propose a “bespoke” service. And quite some time ago, Chanel bought out a number of specialist artisans in the art professions, known for their level of excellence who were under serious threat.

An advertising theme

The “hand made” theme in advertising or on brand websites has followed on from the obvious opulence of the “bling bling” years, when brands were less concerned with using product and manufacturing quality to gain legitimacy, and more concerned with showing their power, their ability to dazzle with opulence and displaying an (apparent) economy

of spend². It is true that narratives including the brand’s values and history, the promotion of the “muse” system and the hyperbole that surrounded the designers did not set the scene for the humble display of the work of the craftsmen.

This strategic change does not mean that an authentic product-based discourse has replaced “story telling” and the use of the brand’s advertising register. The work of the hand, the hand-made product, is but one of the themes used in the new brand narrative framework. And above all, the object is not so much presented as a thing in itself, with its materiality, its method and its appreciable dimensions, as it is exhibited as a proof of excellence, quality and rarity: the object produced and shown remains a sign.

While the advertising and auto-qualification strategies used by brands are bringing the object itself and artisanal production methods back to centre stage, it is not to express something real or because they constitute the truth of the production. In an era of mass consumption of luxury products, this is really just a marginal and obviously exceptional reality. However, this exception is used to hide the rule or at least change it in order to conform to representations of rarity, differentiation and absolute quality that, even today, constitute the pertinent defining traits of membership of the luxury “universe”. From this angle, craftsmanship is an art form. By associating them with the brand, the brand “atones”, in the religious sense, for the sin or downfall that is the industrial production of objects that are mere merchandise and not values, attitudes, ideals or practices attached to people or social groups³.

Thus, the claim on manual and artisanal work in advertising is essentially about evoking it to symbolic ends and as such can be categorised using a Heideggerian lexicon as a “manipulation” (“I handle my thoughts, but I do not manipulate them”). There is no moral

judgement in this statement: advertising, in line with its vocation (in part determined by an economy of means, the obligation to stand out in the harsh market of media attention) uses a piece of data or a characteristic, without manifesting a preoccupation for the thing itself or that which the work of its author commits to. Advertising is “happy” with quoting and using representations, words or images supposing that their literal meaning, commonly admitted and registered in the common culture will make an imprint in the imagination of the consumer. To do so, it only needs to convoke a crystallised meaning in the signs and words according to an associative and metonymic logic, and not to reveal, or to outline precisely the nature of the relationship between the artisan and his materials.

The hand and its task

In addition, it appears interesting to us to underline the evocative power of the hand (and as such the handmade) on which brand rhetoric relies. It is this power that explains that advertising – the logic of which is also that of an “economy” of means –, can evoke, without ever having to prove, the qualitative superiority of artisanal work over industrial production. A superiority that, in fact should not always be taken for granted.

To do so, it is useful to highlight the importance of the hand in the definition of man and in our daily lives by referring to the innumerable locutions and occurrences to which it gives shape in varying cultures and civilisations. The hand acts a rich metaphor or a powerful reality, as it ranges from the divine (the hand of God) to the providential that organises the sum of individual interests into a rational and efficient market (the invisible hand) to the economic providence with a psychological trait (an iron fist/hand). It is also, in turn, involved in the recognition of others and friendship, political affirmation, signing

contracts or markets, personal commitment, and aptitude for cultivating the earth (to have green fingers) or sexuality.

This list might appear fastidious if it didn't reveal an essential characteristic that makes the hand a “thing” apart, as Jacques Derrida pointed out in a conference entitled: “La main de Heidegger” (Heidegger's hand)⁴. Derrida highlights the fact that, for Heidegger, the hand is not, as common sense would have it, a part of the organic body⁵: “The being of the hand does not enable us to determine it as a corporal organ of prehension... aimed at taking, seizing, even scratching, let us add even to take, understand and conceive... It belongs more to the essence of the gift, of a donation that gives, if possible, without taking”. The essence of the hand of man that carries, uses, separates, fashions, offers and keeps is thus linked to the origins of the word and thought. So it matters little if, by attempting to subsume an essence of the man he postulates, Heidegger adopts a “dogmatic” position in as much as he ignores the work of the specialists of the animal reign. He wants to underline the hand's dual vocation: the capacity to show, or to make a sign and the vocation to give (whether it means giving shape or committing man in a “giving of oneself”, in an authentically reciprocal relationship). Let us point out while we're at it that Heidegger evokes the hand in the singular as unique to man and doesn't go into an axiology that distinguishes left from right, skilfulness from *gaucherie*, purity from the “sinister” hand. The hand is taken with all the principles it holds or manifests and as an essential link to word or thought.

Of course, Heidegger is not the first to characterise man by the hand and to thus seize upon the principle of differentiation with the animal world. This follows a long tradition that goes back to Aristotle who gave us this famous text:

“It is not because he has hands that man is the most intelligent of beings, but because he is

the most intelligent that he has hands. In fact, the most intelligent of beings is the one that is capable of using the most tools: and the hand indeed seems not to be one tool, but many. As it is, more or less, a tool that takes the place of so many others. So nature gave by far the most useful tool to the being capable of acquiring the most techniques. In addition, those that say that man is badly constituted, that he is the least well put together of animals (because, they say, he is born without shoes, he is naked and has no weapons to defend himself), are mistaken... Man, on the other hand, possesses numerous means of defence, and has the facility to change them... As the hand can scratch, squeeze, scrape, throw a spear or any other weapon or tool. It can do all this because it can seize everything and hold everything.”

Heidegger, however, distinguishes himself fundamentally from Aristotle in as much as he is not content to, or more explicitly refuses to define the hand by its “utility” and its link to the technical. Of course, the hand is functional, it can be more or less skilful, but it is also, deep down that which gives and gives of itself in the purity of giving and a knowing and finality that go beyond the use of a mere tool.

Heidegger, in his attempt to jointly reflect on manual work and thought (and its learning) continues his train of thought by using the example of an apprentice carpenter (*Schreinerlehrling*) working on a casket (*Schrein*). Derrida commenting this text emphasises its meaning and its aim: “The apprentice casket-maker does not only learn how to use the tools, to familiarise himself with the use, the utility, and *utilité* of the things to do. If he is an authentic “casket-maker” (*ein echter Schreiner*), he follows or refers to the different ways of the wood itself, he accords his work with the shapes that are sleeping in the wood as it penetrates into the habitat of man (*in das Wohnen des Menschen*).

The authentic carpenter accords his work with the hidden plenitude of the wood’s essence and not with the tool and the use value. But with the hidden plenitude in as much as it penetrates the habitat... lived in by man. There would be no such thing as the profession of carpenter without the correspondence between “the essence of wood and the essence of man as a being dedicated to inhabiting”.

And Derrida underlines the importance of the semantic register and as such the translation: “Trade in German is *Handwerk*, the work of the hand, handiwork, or *manœuvre*. When French translates *Hand-werk* by the term *métier*, it is perhaps legitimate and inevitable, but it is a risky *manœuvre*, in the craft of translation, because we lose the hand. By losing the direct reference to the notion of hand, the risk is to re-introduce the idea of a transaction, a service rendered, usefulness, the office, the ministerium, from which perhaps the term *métier* comes”.

So it behoves us to point out that Heidegger, in order to display what is actually going on in the “casket-maker’s” essential activity, exclusively emphasises a dual relationship: on the one hand the one that develops between the hand and the knowledge of the properties and qualities of the material and, on the other, the one that develops between the hand that designs and executes and the destination or the finality of the work. The work of the hand is always carried by the thought that takes support from the material and its characteristics but also by the idea of what it is to “inhabit” a place. This might be an imprecise idea but is in opposition with that which could be a simple response to a commercial demand. In fact, “inhabiting” a place is not the same as furnishing it and could never be summed up by the mere purchase and ownership of a collection of objects. Inhabiting involves a mode of existence, a presence in the world and with others.

Highlighting the “worry” of inhabiting the

world and a phenomenological approach to the hand and materials: we can see that the market and commerce are not mentioned initially. If the market, and its imperatives of profitability are thus kept at a distance, if it doesn't enter in to the definition of a principle, it is because it introduces, according to Heidegger, a potentially corruptive element. The fact that the market has its own demands creates the risk of decline and it cannot replace the will and skill of the artisan, because it would make them bend to a demand that is of an inauthentic nature and outside of the sphere of their work. There exists thus in deed and in law a contradiction between Heidegger's taking into account the nature of the hand's activity and the conceptions of craftsmanship that a number of economic players make, more or less explicitly, for whom craftsmanship or the handmade are "marketing" categories of uncertain content (not examined in any great detail) and over-determined by the objectives of the brand. This divergence is easily repaired, if we compare, for example, the philosopher's thoughts with those of Emmanuel Mathieu, the industrial director of a big luxury brand, during a conference on the concept of "made in France": "Indeed, it is a real paradox to say that we need to provide a unique service and a unique product to increasing numbers of clients"... How is this possible⁶? "Within the *manufactures* of the house that bring together the different skills, each person knows the relationship he or she has with his or her client". Emmanuel Mathieu goes on to outline that this requires a very long training period and the responsibility of the artisan. "For example, the level of quality is taught to the artisan leather goods workers, but they are the only ones who can decide if the level of quality corresponds to the client's expectations. And it is up to the company to teach these expectations well and to communicate them well".

Here we see that the divergence occurs in the

very definition of what it is to be an artisan. If we use the term artisan to describe any trade that involves the use of qualities such as *savoir-faire* (a knowledge of materials and the inter-relations with a whole environment that interacts with this work), a certain type of "psychology" (involvement, satisfaction, pleasure) and a particular ethic (the finality of the work), or we give the term a precise definition that is a simple legal-economic nomenclature and designates a status. The difference between these two definitions is not inconsequential as it implies (or does not imply) a critical vision of forms and of the nature of the organisation of work (let us note in passing that Emmanuel Mathieu seems to be unaware of the real modes of legitimisation of skills or exchanges of knowledge within trade communities, as well as the wealth of relationships that bind together those who ply their trade with passion)⁷.

Obviously, we can reproach Heidegger his "archaism" and mock this distrust of the demand, where others celebrate it, without necessarily suggesting what the hand and craftsmanship are involved in current production techniques. Or even put his thinking on trial by underlining the link it can be said to have with the anti-capitalist discourse of National Socialism. Or, fail to understand what the will to disconnect a product from a "market" can mean⁸.

But there are trials that are a little short and that hide some eminently debatable suppositions behind their evidence (don't we manufacture in order to sell?). So those who bring up the predominance of the market or the commercial finality should symmetrically prove the "qualitative" good points of the market, the relevance of its jurisdiction centred on social demand or social order. The position cannot be held if one only takes commercial success into consideration when dealing with the relationship between men and their worlds or their "œuvres". Whether

it means furniture, literature, food, whatever the area in question, it would condemn us to believe that whatever sells easiest is that which merits recognition and praise. It would then be necessary to prove the cultural superiority of the literature of a certain Lévy, of furniture bought in a supermarket, of the most media-friendly scientist or philosopher, the most industrial wine producer, while mass markets first of all involve harnessing, simplifying and uniformising the tastes and aesthetics that are the conditions for success and the opposite of a living link between the culture of consumers and the knowledge that a product contains and dispenses. The example of wine is particularly indicative of this point. Does being a wine-maker mean taking into account all of the particularities of a region, the soil, the weather and the seasons, experimenting using one's experience and intuition, does it mean exploring according to the idea one has of wine or does it mean killing it to produce a wine of the same constant quality using flavour additives and chemical yeasts, with a reproducible taste that is supposed to correspond to that of the consumer?

So, if the position expressed by Heidegger and others can appear archaic, it has the merit nonetheless of underlining that which is essential in the artisan's work (as he sees it) and to enable, thus, the act of resistance. A resistance that is principled and non-backward looking, that stands against the consumerist ideologies of progress that often, camouflaged as "realism" form part of the demand to take the market's logic into account. Even if this means going back to anthropological or sociological works to think through the nuances and complexities of the multiple situations that one can indeed encounter in the "real".

Signs of an indicial nature: imprints

But there are other virtues or powers within the figure of the artisan and work done by

hand (on which Heidegger seems not to have insisted, no more than he envisaged hands in the plural as they exist in the different forms of touch of the other body). Those of the real experience of a material that, in its plasticity is a source of creative imagination and that inspires or generates shapes and ideas as Gaston Bachelard pointed out in *L'eau et les rêves*; those which oscillate between mastery, the "technicity" of the gesture brought down to an idea of the finished object and that (is this a path unique to art?) which explores and instead of reproducing, innovates.

We must point out, given our stance, the fact that the hand, with its "knack" or specific style, imprints its signature or its mark. So to take up the same example as above, the hand is a sign toward a "destination", but also a sign of the person who is doing the work and carrying out the transformation. This is what makes every artisanal object a unique piece, unlike objects that are reproduced mechanically. Let's say, for example and to overdo things a little, that the difference between artisanal work and industrial work is comparable to that of the difference between the always singular expressiveness of hand writing and the reproduction of a printed text.

In this way, the reference to craftsmanship also conveys a living and concrete representation that takes its place while at the same time expressing the social aspect of artisanal work. In other words, the mention of craftsmanship provides access to a type of sign that testifies to the presence of their "auteur" and the personal relationship with the object. But, the search for presence and relationships through objects is a "demand" that is so strong, as the sociologist Georg Simmel outlines in his *Philosophie de l'argent*, that it constitutes a powerful motivation to purchase (even, paradoxically, when one buys an industrial object). Thus, Simmel considers the purchase as the expression of a subjectivity through which a person imprints their mark on an object⁹. While this urge to

personalise is already present in the purchase of certain objects, it is also what we find with handiwork, carrying out, with trade or intuition, an activity that Lévi-Strauss referred to as “bricolage” (DIY): “...*But there is more: the poetry of bricolage also comes, and above all, from the way in which it is not limited to accomplishing or performing; it tells (...) the character and the life of its “auteur”. Without ever finishing his project, the bricoleur always puts something of himself.*”

On this question of the power and properties of contact signs, a reference to the semiotics of Charles Sander Peirce is enlightening: it enables us to underline that the artisan is a producer of signs *par excellence*, meaning a very particular mode of relating or of messaging between a sign and its object. A quick reminder then that Peirce distinguished three types of relationships between a “representamen” (or sign) and its object that he called icons, indexes or symbols¹⁰.

Signs constitute that which we can see, for example footprints in the snow, the ash or smoke of a fire, the trace made by light on a photosensitive film, the consequences of the gestures of a stone carver or carpenter. We can also say that pallor is a sign of emotion or fatigue, a clenched fist a sign of anger, just like the shouts and gesticulations of primates when confronted by a rival gang for the control of the watering hole, or the imprint of a man’s hand on the clay of a cave.

The examples show that the sign is the direct expression, symptom or effect of this thing manifested. Thus, to say that the clenched fist “naturally” signifies a threat is the same as saying it is the threat, that it presents (not re-presents) the first stage. What the sign is missing is thus the “re” of representation, because there is a continuity and contiguity between the sign and the thing, just like the trace, the singular image (if it were true) of the Turin Shroud or Veronica’s veil (“*vera iconica*”, meaning, “real image”).

This continuity and contiguity of signs place them at the birth of significant processes and make them original and extremely concrete. Thus if we go back to the psychogenesis of each individual, we can see that the first signs a baby reacts to are signs of sensory contact (sounds and voice intonations, caresses from parents, smells, etc.) and that these are the types of signs that are exchanged later on in sexuality. In addition, the index “originary” sign and contact sign can be perceived by animals; where the index, the semiotic split (the difference between sign and thing, between the map and the territory) is not truly marked. The icon is different from the index as it is not created by contiguity and does not put us in direct contact with the thing (the resemblance does however introduce certain elements of continuity). But the indexes (and the icons) have in common the fact that they are analogical signs. Withdrawal, distance and abstraction do not manifest themselves essentially in them, in as much as they transmit and present an affective, physical or sensorial state directly without a major split with the codes. While symbols are conventional signs instituted by an “arbitrary” order. In other words, “the icon functions by similitude between signifying and signified; the index by contiguity of fact; the symbol by connection learnt from a rule”¹¹. In addition, that which supports the mobilisation of the figure of the artisan is both the idea of a style and that of a concrete and appreciable unicity of the object marked by the hand touching and producing signs: “Touching, understanding a shape, an object, is like covering it with imprints” according to the sculptor Giuseppe Penone. Where design (including that of the letter) imposes a controlled and quite “intellectual” conception (the designer has “ideas”), craftsmanship testifies to a direct and original presence and links us back to the childhood of creation. From this perspective, we are forced to admit that all artisanal objects are not on the same level.

If, for example, a bag or a shoe can be sewn together by hand, that hand does not visibly mark it with its imprint. In terms of result, the difference with machine-made products is hard to tell, as the operation is a question of shaping and assembly¹². So the aim is not unicity, but the relative rarity of a manufacturing process that mass production lacks. But what is important to remember is the possibility for the artisanal object to establish a contact and a link between producers and clients that have nothing of the “abstract”. The indexes enable them to establish an inter-subjective relationship that supposes a skilful and aware “end-user” and has no place in an anonymous industrial process, nor with an object where, for example, technological sophistication interposes itself between the producer and the use (who can no longer fix it them himself, by his own hands) nor, finally in an object where all of the relationship is built by the brand.

If the figures of the hand and craftsmanship are today valorised by a great number of luxury brands, it is because the notions are teeming with wealth. The references to Heidegger or Peirce have, we think, the merit of enabling us to be more precise about what this wealth consists of, under the slightly vague image or the symbolic representations. Let us not forget that it has not always been recognised, or highlighted: thus modernity and propaganda for the cause of production, consumption or progress led for a long time to a mistrust in artisanal production considered to be archaic, routine and lacking in creativity. So it would be absurd to give in to the sirens of post-modernism and to endow manual work (in general) with all virtues as a number of luxury brands are currently doing. Simply because the singular figure of the hand only fully actualises its consistence and strength when authentic representations are used and to underline the power of objects thus manufactured in order to engage us in a sensitive, qualitative and ethical

even critical relationship with the world. Let us not forget that it offers a support point that enables us to reconsider, from a point of view that is not exclusively economic, the organisation of work and the question of alienation. Which we could not really expect from businesses where the (real) issue of constant (or “minimal”) quality is conjugated with that of “development”, “management optimisation” or “return on investment”. There is indeed, in the attentive examination of certain forms of craftsmanship and skill, both in the agricultural and object production domains, the possibility of thinking of modes of production, consumption and working that are not limited to the harnessing of a world that is outside the box and that would enable men to take back the reins (into their hands).

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1. In 2010, two of these advertisements were banned in Great Britain. They implied that the articles presented had been manufactured by hand. During the trial, the leather goods maker claimed that the products were conceived by highly experienced artisans and while manual sewing machines were used in the making of the accessories, this was for reasons of solidity and durability, and that this was part “of what we have the right to consider hand-made in the 21st century”. And the ASA recognised that the manufacturing processes at Louis Vuitton included a number of tasks done by hand, in addition to the sewing machines, but criticised the manufacturer for not being in a position to say to what extent this was the case, and as such, the advertisement was “false”.

2. Cf. Remaury, Bruno, “Le luxe à l’ère de la reproductibilité technique”, in *Le Luxe. Essais sur la fabrique de l’ostentation*, IFM-Regard, new reworked edition, Paris, 2011.

3. Cf. Bruno, Remaury, *ibid.*, and Bertrand, Jean-Michel, “Luxe contemporain et sacré”, *op. cit.*, p. 319 and *alii*.

4. Derrida, Jacques, *La Main de Heidegger (Geschlecht II)*, conference given at the University of Chicago, in March 1985. Online: <http://www.jacquesderrida.com.ar/frances/frances.htm>

5. Derrida disagrees with Descartes who considers that the hand is a body part gifted with such independence that it can be considered a separate substance and as such totally separable.
6. We should note that the issue is not to think the “paradoxe” but to get beyond it.
7. On this point – and many others – read Matthew B. Crawford’s *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work*, Penguin Press, 2009. The author is a brilliant academic who left his job to open up a motorbike repair workshop!
8. Morris, William, *L’art et l’artisanat*, Rivages poches/Petite Bibliothèque, Paris, 2011. William Morris, the originator of the “Arts and crafts” movement *de facto* defends a similar point of view. According to him, it would be a misinterpretation to think that the manufactured object should not be the object of a transaction. Nevertheless, it must not be modelled on the imperatives that structure the market. Morris says that it is not the answer to a “demand” that should oversee the conception of an object but that one should do what one wants to do with excellence first. An object thus conceived would have every chance of corresponding to the desire or pleasure of others.
9. Simmel gives the example of one of his friends who liked to buy “nice things”, not to use them, but to give an active expression to his appreciation, to let them pass through his hands, to imprint the mark of his personality on them. As reported by Matthew B. Crawford in *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, *op. cit.*
10. Obviously, these “classes” of signs differentiated by their status and their mode of production are not mutually exclusive and an index such as a non digital photograph can also be an icon or an image.
11. Peirce, Charles Sanders, *Écrits sur le signe*, assembled, translated and commented by G. Deledalle, Paris, Le Seuil (coll. L’ordre philosophique), 1978.
12. During a recent counterfeiting trial (involving ex and current employees of a luxury house), the Colonel of the Gendarmerie in charge of the investigation told the trial that he had begun by “dissecting” the object of the misdemeanour. He concluded: “What is a luxury bag? Some precious or good quality leather, a bit of jewellery for the clasps and the skill required to put them together”.