

Do It Yourself: The Modern Arts and Crafts Movement

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From the late 1800s to the early 20th century, an anti-industrial ideology called the Arts and Crafts Movement spread from England to America. Largely a reaction to the aesthetics borne out of machine production, designers and artisans sought to craft items by hand using traditional methods. Led by Englishman William Morris and based on the ideas of John Ruskin, the movement soon spread throughout Europe and across the ocean to America, eventually influencing 20th century movements such as Art Deco, De Stijl and the Bauhaus (Cumming 6-7).

When major leaps in technology occur ranging from the machine factory to the internet, the soil is fertile for reactionary movements to take seed and grow. Today, the Do It Yourself—DIY—movement is much like the Arts and Crafts Movement of 150 years ago. By embracing the DIY mentality, subscribers seek to reject mass-production in favor of personal ownership and the handmade (Lupton 18). In a time where the machine operator has been replaced by the white-collar drone, DIY practitioners work with both the mind and the hands to create holistically and restore personal meaning while crafting in a compelling social narrative (Levine 2).

Before looking in depth at the DIY movement, it is first necessary to examine the development, ideals and failings of its predecessor, the Arts and Crafts Movement. During the 1800s, an economic shift took place in large portions of Europe and the United States from agrarian to industrial. With this came relocation and reclassification for large segments of the labor force. Cities drew workers away from the farm and into the factory, where their work made them, more or less, cogs in the machine of the Industrial Revolution. The Arts and Crafts Movement was partially a reaction to this change in the role of the laborer as well as a response to the aesthetic of the new machine age and subsequent standardization.

As a reaction to the technological impact on the division of labor, the Arts and Crafts Movement drew on the perceived ideals of the medieval craftsperson compared to the modern machine operator. In her book, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, Elizabeth Cummings states, “The belief that the builders and craftsmen of the later Middle Ages enjoyed complete freedom of expression was central to the writings of Ruskin” (Cummings 12). By creating with his hands, according to Ruskin, the craftsperson was not only productive but creative. He explained his frustration with the dichotomy between worker and thinker:

We want one man to be always thinking, and another to be always working, and we call one a gentleman, and the other an operative; whereas the workman ought often to be thinking, and the thinker often to be working, and both should be gentlemen, in the best sense. As it is, we make both ungentle, the one envying, the other despising, his brother; and the mass of society is made up of morbid thinkers and miserable workers. Now it is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labour can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity (Ruskin 201).

Due to their preoccupation with the medieval craftsperson, artists like Morris often drew heavily upon the corresponding aesthetic of simplified natural forms as can be seen in many of Morris’s wallpaper designs (Figure 1) and decorative goods.

Paired with the reaction to change in labor dynamics was the Arts and Crafts notion that mass-produced goods for consumers were inferior from an aesthetic perspective. Moreover, goods produced were not only of inferior design, according to Morris and fellow Arts and Crafts proponents, but the fact that they were standardized in order to accommodate machine

production meant they were also less significant in both a cultural and personal sense (Cumming 67).

Morris, like many Arts and Crafts practitioners, did not keep his design ideals separate from his political thoughts. This was partially due to the disconnect he noticed “between his ideal of a democratic art and the ‘ideal privileged classes’ who formed his patrons” (Cumming 18). Eventually, Morris turned to Socialism and became increasingly more political. This link between the movement and changes in societal structure during the social turbulence of the 18th century parallels the birth of today’s DIY movement which is similarly born out of societal upheaval due to rapid advances in technology.

In the 19th century, for example, press manufacturers such as Chandler and Price of Cleveland, Ohio began producing platen-style jobbing presses. These machines could easily produce hundreds of prints per hour, while older hand presses—metal versions of the type Benjamin Franklin would have used—were quickly replaced. This greatly increased the speed at which printed matter could be produced thereby making print production more accessible to the average person. In the late 20th century, desktop publishing (with inkjet and laser printers) produced a similar effect. With desktop publishing, however, ease of printing was brought directly into the home, bringing with it an explosion in print material both good and bad (Lupton 19–20).

There is no doubt that technological shifts have only accelerated from the 18th century through modern times. Between innovations in mass production, military technology, synthetic materials, transportation, communication and, more recently, networks such as the internet, the 20th and 21st centuries have been turbulent. From wars and social revolutions to shifts in

economics and labor dynamics worldwide, the dramatic changes to which Ruskin and Morris reacted have been mirrored time and again throughout the modern world. Yet, as Paul Atkinson laments in “Do It Yourself: Democracy and Design,” there is virtually no “discourse” examining DIY as a modern movement despite the fact that it is a powerful “antithesis [to] the prescribed design of the mass marketplace” (Atkinson 1).

Paul Atkinson explains that DIY—the modern manifestation of Arts and Crafts—can be divided into four sensible types: Essential, Lifestyle, Reactive and Proactive, the first of which came to widespread significance following the end of World War I. Essential DIY, or “activities carried out as an economic necessity or because of the unavailability of professional labor” became necessary “not only for the British working classes, but also for those of the middle classes who suddenly found themselves in impoverished circumstances” (3–4). During the Great War, essential DIY was encouraged primarily by propaganda espousing thriftiness and economy at home (Figure 2).

Later in World War II “[the] British self-help movement...involved a whole nation in a government-approved patriotic drive to preserve precious resources” (Atkinson 4) with activities such as “victory canning” and, again, engaging in thriftiness (Figure 3). After the end of the war, DIY moved from being Essential to Lifestyle DIY as the war had “provided men and women with technical skills, confidence, and a predisposition toward using their resourcefulness to realize their dreams of domestic living” in the fertile soil of the post-war population and housing boom. As the population expanded, the suburbs flourished. With that came “the growth of the emerging home-improvement infrastructure” which was supported by new middle class

homeowners who, unlike their Victorian predecessors, maintained their property without the help of servants (4).

Atkinson claims that Lifestyle DIY differs from Essential in that it is not based on necessity, but rather is a voluntary activity usually born out of “emulation or conspicuous consumption” (3). This can be seen as a practical manifestation of the idiom “keeping up with the Joneses.” Fueled by “the GI Bill of Rights” and television programs advocating “the constant makeover of interiors and gardens,” DIY became more than an end. Rather, as written in *The Practical Man’s Book of Things to Make and Do*, ““The man who can use tools properly is to be envied...,”” which fueled middle class home improvement competition (5-6).

Following the emergence of Lifestyle DIY in Western civilization, manufacturers soon recognized opportunity for monetary gain by creating “kits” for this new breed of craftsman. According to Atkinson, “Manufacturers and retail chains alike have worked to develop and promote easier methods of producing the results which once required so much dedicated input through new materials and kits of parts, which to some extent, can be regarded as removing a previously desired element of individuality” (5). This, ironically, reintroduces the standardization that Arts and Crafts philosophy sought to remove from art and architecture just a generation prior.

Atkinson calls this sort of DIY commonly practiced by hobbyists Reactive. It consists of “hobby and handcraft or building activities mediated through the agency of kits, templates or patterns...involving the assembly of predetermined components, where the motivation might range from the occupation of spare time to personal pleasure...” A popularization and

commoditization of DIY, Reactive DIY may keep idle hands busy, but it is a clear departure from the spirit of Arts and Craft which sees the craftsperson as more than a maker.

In contrast to Reactive, Proactive DIY “activities...contain significant elements of self-directed, creative design input, and...might involve the skilled manipulation of raw materials or original combination of existing components” (3). Barry Bucknell, a 1962 DIY expert from “About The Home,” famously created a small boat for his son using raw materials which was “pragmatic and inventive” (Jackson 62). He began with cardboard models and, through “trial and error,” crafted an original design for the dinghy using plywood, fiber glass tape and polyester resin (62).

Contemporary craftsperson Andrew Wagner continues Atkinson’s conversation concerning the evolution of DIY:

...[Finding] that balance on the precarious cliff called “craft” can be a struggle, as has been the case in recent history. Craft in the 1960s and ‘70s swung too far in one direction, as the hippy counterculture embraced it for its political, back-to-the-earth qualities while, for the most part, tossed actual quality aside. In reaction to this, makers of all sorts looked to distance themselves from this fervent politicizing...As the ‘80s turned to the ‘90s, galleries and museums began to dominate the high-end craft world, and discussions with street-level craft movements had all but ceased. Fortunately, with the dawn of the new millennium, we’ve reached a moment of possibility, a chance at reconciliation perhaps (Levine 2–3).

A modern champion of DIY, Martha Stewart has done much to propagate the culture of craft. From *Martha Stewart Magazine*, her magazine which provides countless DIY projects, to inspiring other publications such as *Real Simple* and *Readymade*, Stewart made craft a popular sensation for a broad, modern-day audience (Lupton 20). Lupton, however, contrasts Martha Stewart to Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci who, like John Ruskin, saw craft as a maker's activity as much as it was that of the thinker. Lupton argues that, while Stewart made DIY popular, the current generation "[does] not identify with the gracious perfectionism of Martha Stewart or with the tidy traditionalism of Pottery Barn." Rather, Lupton suggests that this new generation tends toward development of "skills...both technical and theoretical" (21).

The original Arts and Crafts Movement failed due in part to the over-politicizing of its members. Conversely, the rejection of modernization and technological shifts was equally, if not more, detrimental to its success. The extreme romanticization of the medieval laborer developed many dream societies, such as C.R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft, which were profoundly influential and progressive (Cumming 28). Yet such communal living arrangements were as unsustainable as they were radically socialistic and unprofitable, as evidenced by the formation and collapse of many utopian craft communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Cumming 172).

Longevity and prosperity of DIY lies in learning from the mistakes of the past and remembering the profound ideas on which it is based: rejection of both mass-production and passive consumption (Atkinson 1). To utilize technology or even focus on technology as a craft is not necessarily antithetical to the notion of DIY—or Arts and Crafts, for that matter. What is central to DIY is that what is mass-produced is not produced with as much consideration or as

personally meaningful as that which is crafted by the individual. Similarly, by consuming thoughtfully, the individual is rewarded with a greater tie to the physical world around him or her as well as residual benefits such as a reduced expenditure on consumer goods and a product custom-tailored to the users' needs and aesthetic inclinations.

In *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, Matthew Crawford states, “craftsmanship has been said to consist simply in the desire to do something well, for its own sake. If the primary satisfaction is intrinsic and private in this way, there is nonetheless a sort of self-disclosing that takes place” (Crawford 14). This is the third—and perhaps most important—component to the structure on which the new Arts and Crafts Movement is built: When the individual takes upon himself or herself to create something, some part of the individual is expressed in a tangible and extremely personal way. Not only is generic consumption avoided, it is turned upon its head. The physical object tells a story about its creator and is marked by his or her thumbprint. DIY fosters and is continually made new through a culture of personal creation.

The popularity and growth of Renegade Craft Fairs, a contemporary marketplace of DIY practitioners, demonstrates two additional facets of DIY as a movement: it is necessarily personal and essentially organic. When making fails to be personal in the way in that Crawford describes, the objects produced begin to lose their soul. Melena Ryzik of *The New York Times* describes what she calls “problems of scale” as she interviews Renegade vendors in “Where the Crafts Babes and DIY Dudes Are.” She quotes Faythe Levine saying, “I hate making them [plush messenger owls] now...I got overwhelmed with orders and couldn't keep up with production” (Ryzik). As making becomes impersonal, it becomes burdensome to the craftsperson and DIY itself falls victim to the perils of mass-production. As “consumers are

looking for an alternative to impersonal, mass-produced objects,” the sub-culture of DIY runs the risk of being commoditized as it was in the years following World War II (McKeough).

Yet, unlike the 1950s, the DIY movement of the 21st century is capable of changing rapidly and propagating its ideals faster than ever before due to the technological advances of the information age—the internet being the main conduit through which ideas are transmitted. This further blurs the line between art and craft as practitioners share and are inspired without the limitations of time or physical location. Through open source sharing of success, failure and innovation, craftspeople are able to transition from one discipline to another—or merge disciplines—in the event that they desire to expand their repertoire or avoid the pitfall of becoming a mass-producer. In the 21st century, the web developer, printer and knitter can all share in the same DIY culture. Similarly, the printer can decide to take up knitting, boat-making or development with relative ease if he or she desires to do so. In a departure with the Arts and Crafts hatred of modern technology, the DIY practitioners have learned how to thrive by incorporating and taking ownership of technological innovations.

While it does not necessarily share any aesthetic or political valence to the Arts and Crafts Movement, DIY shares with it a profoundly philosophical foundation rooted in rejection of mass production and passive consumerism in favor of personal expression and the idea that the craftsperson is as much a thinker as he or she is a laborer. These ideas transcend any political ideology or aesthetic outworking. The creator of contemporary furniture is the child of William Morris even though his creation is sparse and modern while Morris’ is decidedly inspired by the Middle Ages (Figure 4 and 5). The craftsperson who creates plush food items is a member of the same fraternity as the ceramicist firing bird feeders (Figure 6 and 7).

Do It Yourself promises to continue the legacy of the Arts and Crafts Movement as it holds true to the same ideals. Paul Atkinson summarizes by stating, "...all forms of DIY have enabled the consumer to rail against the prescribed design edicts, and indeed, prescribed social mores of the time. Moreover...DIY can be seen as the ultimate expression of individual taste, and therefore as an accurate yardstick by which the popular aesthetics of design can be measured" (Atkinson 9). DIY not only gives the individual craftsman the ability to manifest himself or herself through craft, but it gives the individual a voice as part of a dialog that is centuries old. Not only is the craftsman no longer a passive consumer, he or she is a creator of that which is personally significant, a culture-maker and a philosopher.

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Figure 1. Sample wallpaper pattern designed by William Morris evidencing medieval influence.



Figure 2. WWI propaganda advocating thriftiness as a means of aiding the war effort.



Figure 3. WWII propaganda where canning is suggested as a DIY activity which might aid the fight against Axis Powers.



Figure 4. Beam Table B by husband and wife DIY team HollerDesign. Sample of contemporary handmade furniture.



Figure 5. Table by William Morris designed with inspiration from the medieval aesthetic



Figure 6. Plush food items by My Paper Crane. Represents diversity of DIY crafters.



Figure 7. Modern ceramic bird feeders by Brooklyn's Perch. Another representation of DIY diversity.