The Tradition in Crafts

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The last decade of the nineties has been the apogee of the Craft Fair. This nationwide State and NGO (non-governmental organisation) sponsored peripatetic phenomenon has fixed locales (fair grounds, community centres and the like) in every city of visitation and has its own bureaucratic apparatus governing selection of crafts and their representatives who are not necessarily craftspeople themselves. They are the well known handloom and handicraft expositions and large scale fairs featuring leather, food and agriculture, popular art, traditional sciences and technologies and the like. Held periodically to coincide with important annual seasons and festivals, mass events such as these aim to attract the wider public with craft information and products from all India in an atmosphere of family entertainment at an affordable price. Indeed the national fair, ever willing to showcase lesser known and still unknown aspects of India’s tradition, is the emerging genre of public outreach where values and products are experienced (sampled rather) and exchanged in an overall spirit of nationwide unity in diversity.

The present concern is not to conduct a critical inquiry into the phenomenon of the Craft Fair but rather an occasion to reflect upon what do we really mean when we say we are engaged in the exposition, preservation, promotion and development of traditional crafts at the national level. In order to understand this, it is necessary to go into the genealogy of the notion of the traditional craftsman. Stella Kramrisch, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy and Soetsu Yanagi are important figures responsible for the scholarly discourse on the notion of the craftsman - as an aspect of tradition. In what follows I shall briefly show how the concept of tradition as understood by the three scholars has indeed shaped the books A Japanese Insight into the Phenomenon of the Craft Fair (cf. Lipsey 1977).

Coomaraswamy in fact employed the term tradition as a key orientalist idea to characterise ancient civilisations like India as being essentially spiritual. He developed it as an attack on western materialism and as a political critique on the evils of modern society in particular those wrought by industrial production. By conjoining Hindu, Buddhist, medieval Christian and Muslim art as the art of traditional cultures, whose conceptions of truth were basically similar even if expressed differently, Coomaraswamy was able to use tradition as a synthesis of culture. His first hand experience among craftsmen in Ceylon, association with the Arts and Crafts Circle in Britain and continued involvement with the nationalist struggle for self-government in India, culminated in a series of essays published in 1909 in the books Essays in National Idealism and The Indian Craftsman (cf. Lipsey 1977).

Kramrisch sought to understand Indian art and craft through its literary traditions of myth and philosophy. Her usage of tradition however is not merely that of metaphysical symbolism but grounded in concrete practice and manifest form. In her article, Traditions of the Indian Craftsman, the craftsman is denoted as a practitioner of Tradition, one who is indeed the link between the Divine Principle and the worshiper or patron. In her view, awareness of Tradition is active on all the levels of the craftsman’s being. If he infringes on Tradition, if the composition of a painting has no wholeness, the painter shows himself not as a poor artist but he becomes, thereby, an unholy person (Kramrisch 1958, 1994: 62).

Yanagi equally highlighted the importance of a unified tradition in the work of Japanese craftsmen. The Japanese government’s policies of overt westernisation during the Meiji period had gradually led to the rise of a cultural nationalism promoting Japanese values and practices reoriented as tradition. Yanagi sought to discover the beauty of handicraft in the power of tradition itself viewed as the accumulated wisdom of generations and known as the Given Power among the Buddhists. According to him, To the craftsman, tradition is both the savior and the benefactor. When he follows it, the distinction between talented and untalented individuals all but disappears: any craftsman can unfailingly produce a beautiful work of art (Yanagi 1972,1989). Through out his life Yanagi worked hard to blur the indigenous distinction between jōtemono i.e. refined works created by individual artists and getemono or objects of everyday life made by anonymous craftsmen. For him the non-individualism of tradition was the true marker of beauty rather than knowledge of the identity of individual genius. Indeed his book The Unknown Craftsman is subtitled A Japanese Insight into Beauty.

By viewing the practice of a craft or creativity itself as spiritual revelation embodied in oral and literary religious texts Coomaraswamy, Kramrisch and Yanagi
were able to provide the basis for the unity of culture redefined as a national heritage and thereby conceptually oppose it to that of the Occident. Yet in the later years of their life all three sought refuge in the modern institution of the Museum rather than with the Indian, Traditional or Unknown craftsman they were at pains to understand and know. Their concern, a critique of industrialism, although appropriate for the times, is now interpreted both as nostalgia for the handicraft mode of production and a revival of a tradition now in steady decline. The most elitist abdication of machine reproduction by all three scholars prevented them from envisioning the present day reality of contemporary craftspersons who may belong to a family or community of practitioners but not actually have anything to do with traditional crafts. Or designers who may have no traditional background in craft and yet work with traditional crafts employing modern techniques and practices for different markets.

In the present situation tradition is not seen as a bound category symbolising nation or civilisation. For it is no longer possible to speak of nations without border disputes and regional cooperation and civilisations without exchanges and influences. It is time perhaps to re-examine the manner in which one perceives the blurring of tradition in crafts outside private and museum collections, and particularly at National Craft Fairs. For it is here that the classic original competes with its cheap copy, where hand crafted objects jostle for space along with those that are machine made and where the remote and unknown meets the neighbouring and the familiar. National Craft Fairs are also the breeding grounds for newer products and still newer markets as it is here that local and regional characteristics and products are viewed, borrowed, disguised and even transformed. This union of tradition and modernity (however impure) is indeed the contemporary reality. The question is where do we go from here? In Japan the State in fact is clear about the preservation of its national heritage and the institution of the Museum is strongly entrenched in the public life of the people. Moreover the issue of the craftsman both known and unknown is also not ambiguous. The individual artists among them are celebrated designers of craft products whereas Yanagi’s unknown craftsmen are now officially recognised and supported as national living treasures. In India the Museum is yet to become a popular institution for the dissemination of culture, master craftsman awards are not exclusive enough and designers continue to occupy an ambivalent position between fine art and not so fine craft.

The clash between tradition and modernity continues only if one views the two concepts as static. Artisans have historically always been known to respond to new technologies and materials and to expand their markets wherever possible. Labeling crafts as an example of India’s living traditions against the backdrop of the modern museum displaying extinct ones, or viewing them as traditional crafts vis a vis contemporary arts and crafts is no longer the crucial issue here. Regardless of nomenclature, the present scenario as exemplified in the National Craft Fair is such that it is now imperative to take cognisance of the changed situation of the Indian Craftsman on the one hand and the emerging role of the Indian Designer on the other.

Notes

1. The Kala Mela or art fair held in Calcutta, hosted by the Lalit Kala Akademi is a case in point. It is a mass art event … drawing on groups and regions that lie outside the metropolitan elite circles …[and] over the years, become an integral feature of our national public life (cf. Tapati Guha-Thakurta 1996:35).

2. An important component of National Congresses on Traditional Sciences and Technologies organised by the PST Foundation has been the representation of the voice and work of the artisan/practitioner that includes both a visual documentation and sale of their craft products.

3. There is nothing new about the traveling fair. Like the weekly market (the haat or the sandai) and other local and regional level fairs and festivals, the National Craft Fair is yet another expression of cultural and commercial exchange.

4. In his later years he set up the Japan Folkcraft Museum (Nihon Mingeikan) dedicated to the arts and crafts of the common people.

5. It is interesting that Yanagi had in fact met American industrial designer Charles Eames in 1954 and also explored bridging the gap between hand work and machine work through contemporary design. It is also well known that the charter of the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, is to a large part influenced by The Eames Report of 1958. In this report, Charles and Ray Eames believed that India is a tradition oriented society and therefore recommended a learning from tradition as a way of promoting small scale industry and at the same time prevent the rapid deterioration of consumer products in the country.

References


