

# **NEW WAYS TO EDUCATE DESIGNERS THROUGH THE LEARNING OF CRAFT AND NEW CRAFT DESIGN IN THE CREATION OF MATERIAL CULTURE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The first part of the paper describes: the present serious problem of the artisan and his craft in undeveloped countries. However in developed countries many years ago the artisans evolved and adapted their production techniques and their way of work to the present requirements. There has been a gradual process of evolution in countries like the USA, Italy, Spain and Japan. It's name is "New craft Design".

Between the strategies of the "New Craft Design" the designer is a central actor who represents an element that is capable of transmitting relevant knowledge about production techniques and aesthetics for the evolution of the artisan and his craft. This paper also describes the processes that have allowed the future designers from the Technological of Mixteca University at Oaxaca, Mexico, and the artisans in the same region to join their knowledge with the goal of allowing the craft product to evolve and improve in a competing global market.

*Key words: New craft design, Mexican material culture, Design education processes.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

At the present time the world tendency is toward global culture – a concept used describe the characteristics that any given product integrating the various spaces of human interaction should display, according to Ono [1] "the adoption of global design demands the creation of products with a universal language capable of penetrating all the social, cultural and economic barriers of different markets irrespective of local particularities..." This global tendency tends to homogenize all products based on a concept of permitting their introduction into a widely diverse marketplace. Generally speaking, at the present time each industrial sector seeks to design an absolute product capable of satisfying the needs of a single universal user.

However according to Ricard [2] "...it is impossible to reduce human diversity to an absolute uniformity...this so called "universal human being" becomes, unfortunately, the model imitated by people of different ethnicities who support the invasion of their cultural territory by merchandise which is foreign to them and suffer the consequent loss of their genuine idiosyncrasy... the universal homogenization of things leads to cultural impoverishment..."

Thus it is impossible to speak of humankind as a homogeneous entity because precisely upon making such generalizations the human dimension is lost: material equipment must be created to the exact measure of any given human group whose anthropometrics,

cultural, and affective characteristics are related and who share common geographic, climatological, political, and economic circumstances. This creates authentic development.

Therefore we consider it necessary to empower the material craft culture leading it to evolve into a neocraft in order to allow it to find its place in the contemporary human market and environment without losing its richness and cultural heritage.

In spite of the fact that in many countries traditional crafts are present and the techniques and the materials are the same ones that have always been practiced and used, this is simply not enough. One key aspect, which often diminishes interest in crafts, is the fact that we live in a time in which the tastes of the consumer are eclectic and influenced by powerful communications media, as well as the continuous proximity of hundreds of articles (many of them unnecessary). In light of this problem, we believe we should take advantage of the coherence, content, feeling and beauty which crafts exhibit.

Although it is part of the social norm for the many cultural aspects of a society to be in constant change, in developing countries these changes are coming about in a very negative way about the detriment of the traditional socio-cultural values.

Currently in the case of Mexico, there is a serious and particular problem being experienced by crafts, the craftsmen and his workshop, which reflect the urgent necessity of improvement. Because the craft products require a substantial change. They need new strategies, which will permit them to widen their possibilities of entering other markets. They need the end users to perceive these craft articles as familiar products, with a great deal of cultural heritage, and with characteristics which allow them to be brought into contemporary domestic spaces.

The problem confronting Mexican crafts is a reflection of the difficult situation which craftsmen (the majority of whom belong to different indigenous groups) are facing, namely the fact that their activity provides them only the most basic subsistence. This problem is serious but not impossible to resolve, especially if a solution is considered in which different actors bring in their knowledge and experience as part of the solution. Once integrated, the solution will attempt to resolve each of the different aspects of which it is comprised.

Within this group of actors are two that have central importance in solving the problem: the artisan and the designer.

In the first place, it is absolutely necessary to effect a change in the artisans' workshop, which would allow for the improvement of the quality and finish of the product and the replacing and improving of some aspects of the traditional process.

Another problem peculiar to Mexican artisans is that many sell their products directly to the consumer. Others sell their products to small wholesalers who pay the artisans very low prices for their goods. Yet another problem of great relevance is the fact that the artisans themselves do not make good use of the natural resources they take from their environment for the manufacture of their crafts. Presently much of their natural resources are either exhausted or nearly so as is the case with the aromatic wood of Olinala tree from Guerrero[3].

## **2 THE NEW CRAFT DESIGN**

The new trend in conceiving and manufacturing products is called "The New Craft Design". This new trend has been developed in several European countries the United States and Japan. This new trend has allowed the Artisan craft process and production to evolve and adapt to new contemporary situations and survive.

In the following paragraphs we will describe some relevant examples of this new trend that have been studied in this work. Through these cases we have been able to identify several concepts, principles and ideas that have functioned as guidelines and models for the artisans and future designers. These models will lead us to gradual solutions for unique artisan craft problems in developing countries.

Recently in the United States this new craft design has been tried in a series of small companies located in New York, Florida and California. They are small industries composed of artisan workshop where artisans produce, customize and number products in limited quantities. These artisans produce domestic furnishings that utilize, illuminate and complement a variety of materials, such as metal, clay, glass, wood and other traditional craft materials [4].

Many artisans, industrial designers and some architects have been studied. Initially we studied the contributions of some artisans such as Sam Maloof and John Makepeace. In particular we analyzed the case of Charles and Ray Eames because they were some the first American architects and designers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who looked at crafts as an important source of ideas. Their work is distinguished because they used the aesthetic inspirations and techniques of the craftsmanship process from the past, while simultaneously making good use of the current technologies.

Another case studied is the Swiss company “Ruckstuhl”. This company has recovered the craft tradition of rug making using natural fibres. The Swiss textile designer Jack Lenor took the aesthetic inspiration of this craft from several countries, such as India, Kenya, Peru and several other Latin countries. The collection of rugs designed and created by Larson represent an excellent combination of the traditional craft techniques of antique cultures (for example in Mexico the prehispanic cultures) and the extremely competent management of the Ruckstuhl Company[5].

Another relevant case study is the Abruzzo zone in Verona Italy. With the goal to save the cultural traditions of the zone, the commercial and the artisan sectors joined many years ago to research the aesthetic – linguistic nature of contemporary art, craft products and industrial design. The specific strategy they employed was a joining of the Verona city artisans of the old traditional crafts, contemporary artists, teachers from design schools in the zone and business men from several sectors in the zone. The central idea of this meeting was redesigning the region inside and outside the zone thus creating a new identity for that region, bringing new life to the old and new traditions.

In Catalonia Spain, a series of visits with various artisans in Barcelona, Miravet, Tarragona, Sarra and Conca de Barberá were made. We especially analyzed the grand masters of the popular art thanks to the information provided by the Catalonia Department of Business, Industry and Tourism and by the Centre of Catalonia Artisans.

Through this analysis we can confirm that many artisans use modern technology in the production of craft objects and in many cases they are working together with industrial designers and companies producing a variety of decorative, useful products.

The European artisan situation is excellent from the point of view of technology and cooperation within the community.

In the Italian and the Catalan case this cooperative functioning network has been in existence for many years. Through this style of cooperation, coming together in small teams of artisans and business people, the concept, aesthetics and materials of cultural traditions and crafts continue to grow and expand.

We will highlight the specific characteristics present in the network of cooperation in the Italian community mentioned. These characteristics allow the artisans to function in an optimum manner.

- The participation of banks, contributing capital for the promotion and development of the artisan network.
- The participation of large companies in the region contributing their modern technology, production systems and management experience while incorporating the artisans' design.
- The participation of the Town Councils promoting the cultural and folk traditions of the region through cultural activities and celebrations displaying the customs, history and crafts of the area.

### **3 THE MEXICAN CRAFTSMEN**

Due to the difficult conditions of the Mexican artisans their future is uncertain, in general they do not have the processes, production capacity and product quality. In the next paragraphs, using the cases of the New Craft Design trend studied, we will describe some of the more relevant guidelines of the model conceived for proposed solutions to solve this problem[6].

We propose as a first step, that each artisan from a specific region, get in touch with other similar artisans in their region and the surrounding regions. This very important step begins the process of uniting them to create groups of artisans working together toward the same goal.

This new grouping of artisans then creates a series of personal networks. The possibility of this developing network is very real in Mexico because of the modern communication technology in existence. This new network can be created and utilized from the artisans place of work, letting each person in each locale contribute their knowledge and experience.

We propose that these new artisan networks work within, and are supported by the universities in their region. In this way the artisans can get important elements and ideas through the advice and didactic experiences of the professors of these institutions.

### **4 PROCESSES DIRECTED AT THE DESIGN STUDENTS FOR THE CREATION OF CRAFTS PRODUCTS**

We consider the designer to be one of the most important elements in this new craftsman networks. The designers' contribution is an important part of the evolution and improvement of the craftwork and, ultimately, the product.

The influence of industrial design in the Twentieth century has been, a powerful tool and has resulted in mass production and competition between all the products. This has gradually led to products improved designs.

The Mexican designer has to be especially sensitive to the difficult conditions of the Mexican artisans. With this goal of participation in a new craft network, recognition and sensitivity must be given to the artisans. Whose work is established as well as those less established. All participating artisans working together can preserve the Mexican folk traditions for the contemporary market place. The Mexican designer can guide the creation of small and medium size industries, allowing all levels of artisans to survive.

At the Technological University of Mixteca (Oaxaca) they have a program bringing together the worlds of design and craft production. In the next paragraphs we will follow and describe this teaching approach.

#### **4.1 Preparation**

This experience began with the teacher presenting a broad description of Mexican craft culture - developing topics like traditional crafts, materials and techniques. The teacher

then analyzed the Mexican craft products from historic perspective emphasizing that the Mexican craft product has been experiencing an important evolution without losing its cultural identity.

Next the teacher and the students together analyze the social context of the craft product. In this analysis they study every day products and to the human condition in a social and cultural context. They also study the communicative values of the product, and how these capacities of communication between the product and the user have been modified through time.

The last part of this study analyzes how the introduction of foreign products has invaded and affected the Mexican markets.

This initial section finishes with an analysis of excellent craft products by some artisans who are relevant representatives of Popular Mexican Art.

#### **4.2 Artisan guest**

The second section of the teaching experience is contact/interaction between a guest artisan and the students. The artisan introduces himself to the group and gives a short introduction, speaking about the origin of his family and the traditions of his community. The artisan explains to the students some ideas about the products that he has produced showing some examples of them and describing several aspects regarding the materials and their properties, their colors and the process that he uses.

With this pedagogic process we seek a real and direct contact between the students and the artisan, his craft products and his techniques of production in order to guide the students into a gradual conception of the creative possibilities of that knowledge.

The student groups need several sessions to complete this process. In this second part, the experience is very interesting for the students because they have to develop practical sessions where the artisans teach to the group the traditional techniques that they use for the production of a specific craft product.

Having this knowledge as a base, the students have to make a craft product using the traditional techniques, materials and aesthetic elements observed in the process of creating a craft product by the guest artisan.

In the following sessions the guest artisan evaluates the products developed by the students and corrects them. The teacher also participates in this evaluation.

#### **4.3 Generation of a new product**

After a specific period of time the students develop the second and last practical part of the pedagogic process: a product of the new craft. In this product the student has to mix traditional aspects with some modern elements. In this project the teacher emphasizes the requirement that the Mexican cultural material must agree with the contemporary Mexican way of life in order to lead the students toward the creation of a kind of production system using traditional and contemporary elements for the conception of every day Mexican products.

It is relevant to explain that this creative pedagogic process was developed as part of two specific subjects of the Design Engineering's program: Composition and Methods of Design. In both subjects the craft of process represents a powerful tool that guides the students to the conception of an evolutionary development of new plastic or sensorial languages. The specific knowledge which helps the students to develop new sensorial languages is integrated into two aspects:

- The first one is the identification and study of each one of the traditional plastic or sensorial elements used by the artisans like forms, graphics, colors, and textures.
- The second aspect is the experimentation with these sensorial elements searching for new patterns, combinations, and applications especially created for the new Mexican craft products.

An important part of developing these products is making them a natural part of the every day Mexican lifestyle. To be successful in this part the students analyzed the real daily activities and regular habitual places utilized by the Mexican people, with the goal of identifying the necessities of life that aren't fully being satisfied or as of yet are undeveloped.

As a final part of the process, the artisan, the teacher and also the students analyze together other contemporary requirements and challenges of the craft products. Sustainability is a subject closely related to craft work because the natural origin of the craft materials.

Another subject also take in consideration is the necessity of integrating new techniques and tools into the craft production system. In this phase the teacher develops a short description on the latest techniques in this subject.

Using this knowledge and experience a group of students have been trained in the craft techniques in the laboratories of the Technological University of Mixteca.

We have learned that with the new craft products developed by the students will have extraordinary new elements of the Mexican material culture with great quality, variety and original technique resolution. This is the reason why this network of collaboration between designers, schools of design and craftsmen represent part of a very successful, creative, productive relationship that promises to produce excellent results and many profits.

## **5 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The problem of the craftsmanship and their craft in Mexico and in general in undeveloped countries is a serious and complex problem, but for the reasons described, not impossible to solve. The participation of different actors is necessary. They bring knowledge and resources as well as new craft – models to be followed. They bring fresh, new solutions to this problem.

The designer has the role of a central actor in this process because of his knowledge of the craft problems and present productive process. For this reason the designer is a great force of creativity in obtaining innovative ideas which let the craftsmen save, preserve and foment a cultural identity of the product, and as well as carry out and generate ideas that offer real solutions to this urgent contemporary problem.

At the present at the Technological University of Mixteca at Oaxaca Mexico, a senior artisan, professors and future designers have joined together and applied the new craft model. Through this first experience of working together it has been possible to help the artisans solve some different problems, such as production techniques and design solutions, and at the same time it has been possible to turn the design students into more sensible professionals whose interest in the problem is real and personal in the context of their every day professional life of craftsmanship.

In this experience, a series of products of the new craft tendency has been developed by the students. They have created a kind of production system using traditional and contemporary elements for the conception of every day Mexican products. This

collaboration between professors, future designers and craftsmen represent a part of a very successful, happy, creative and productive relationship that promises to produce excellent results and many profits.

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