

Leonard Shapiro, September 2005

The Craft Industry in South Africa Today, Appropriate Mechanisation, Large-Scale Production and the Application of Business Principles

Brief Outline of The Craft Industry In South Africa Today

The craft industry in South Africa has shifted dramatically in the last 5 years and has become far more professional and coordinated in its approach to product development, marketing and the application of business principles to the crafts environment. Five years ago (and just 5 years into our new democracy) the notion of, "large scale production" was perceived by some as being in diametric conflict with craft making. At this early stage in coordinated craft development, structured crafts businesses were hardly in existence and the learning curve in respect of crafts development had only just begun. As such, this perception of crafts derived from a misunderstanding of the nature of a crafted product and the role that crafts play in the contribution to economic development in the lives of individuals and that of the country as a whole.

Today in South Africa, highly structured government and non-governmental efforts are being successfully synchronised in a move which is continually developing the crafts industry such that it is beginning to participate more and more in the main stream economy. In the long term, as in countries where the crafts industry is already highly developed, the ultimate beneficiaries of these developmental efforts are potentially millions of people.

South African crafters possess exceptional skills and indigenous knowledge in manipulating a variety of available materials. What has been lacking is an awareness by crafters (many of whom live in rural areas) of market demands. Product developers and marketers are now beginning to work with crafters in order to modify their products such that they fit better into existing markets. Where possible, links are being established between crafters and retailers via electronic means (e.g. fax machine) so that orders can be received directly by the crafter. Essentially, the efforts being made are to ensure that crafters correspond to the business language and etiquette of the main-stream economy. The South African government recognises crafts businesses as vital to the inclusion of rural people into the economy and as such funds the intervention of crafts development. This development includes product development, marketing and business skills training.

Themba Masala is the owner of *Raaswater Paper Craft and Design*, a business that produces a range of brightly coloured paper mache crafts. This crafts business is in a village in a rural area called Raaswater, 16 kilometers from Upington in the Northern Cape. There is extreme poverty in this village with most people living in tin and reed shacks. This now successful business began with

one person, namely Masala, who had the decorative and technical skills to make his craft but possessed almost no business skills and had no access to the South African retail market.

Introduction of Masala's crafts to the retail market was initially made by simply emailing images of his crafts to appropriate retail outlets in South Africa. Orders followed almost immediately with one buyer flying from Cape Town to Upington and purchasing 35 of his crafts for cash. Today, and some 20 months after his first order, this business is entirely self sufficient and 9 people are working full time on filling orders.

Craft Making (Manufacturing). A Balance between the Appropriate use of Mechanisation the Skilled "Hand" of the Crafter

Crafts, like many other products, combine varying degrees and combinations of "hand" and "tool" elements in the manufacturing process. "Tool" elements range from basic and direct extensions of the hand such as a hammer, saw or paint brush to more sophisticated and less direct extensions of the hand such as moulds.

Concern is sometimes expressed when words such as "manufacturing", "manufacturing technology" and "production" are applied to the craft making arena. Technology is used to a lesser or greater degree in the making of all craft. Technology is simply an array of suitable tools that enables a person to achieve more command over their materials by refining and extending their design possibilities and is ultimately an extension of their brain and hand.

It is interesting to note that word, "manufacturing" derives from the Latin word "manus" which means "hand". A crafter may use a hammer and chisel in the "process of making" or "manufacturing". Crafts, like many other products, combine varying degrees and combinations of hand and tool elements in the manufacturing process. Tool elements range from basic and direct extensions of the hand such as a hammer, saw or paint brush to more sophisticated and less direct hand extensions such as moulds.

Whether a single hammer is used or an array of massive high-tech machines, there are elements of a crafted product that need to have the hand ("manus" in Latin) of the crafter in close contact with the article for it to appeal as an authentic crafted item. It is often the case that the more low-tech the machines or equipment used, the more the application of the hand of the crafter will be evidenced throughout the different stages in the making of the crafted item. Conversely, the more advanced the machinery used and the more the hand is *distanced* from the craft that is being made, the less the hand of the crafter will be evident in the finished item.

This does not mean to say that there is in all instances a direct correlation between high technology and an increase in the distance of the crafter's hand

from the crafted item. A high-tech tool such as a hand-held laser may be used to etch a line into a metal bowl. Certainly, the hand of the crafter will be clearly evidenced in the marks that are made. There is a cut-off point at which a crafted item loses its appeal as an *authentic* craft item. This point can be defined by the *distance* between the hand of the crafter from the item such that the mark-making becomes non-evident as *mechanisation is used* to repeat the marks. This *distance* will be exacerbated by the transferring of those marks that were made *by hand* in the early prototype stage, into the identical marks that are now reproduced *by mechanical means*.

The repetitive *mechanical reproduction* of initially *human-made* marks and their subsequent application to objects removes an important visual aspect of the object as a whole that is crucial to reflecting its hand-made nature. *Reproducing* human-made marks contradicts the very nature of mark-making where *no two marks are ever the same* when produced by hand. This is especially applicable to crafts in ensuring their authenticity and consequent appeal. Marks that were originally made with a brush, when reproduced and printed onto transfers and fired onto a ceramic plate, will render the plate a mere *copy* of the original, possessing absolutely no significant hand work.

There is nothing wrong with large scale or mass production in itself. It is a necessary step that many successful crafts businesses take in the development of their business. The problem arises on an aesthetic level with the *inappropriate* interventions of mass production technology, such as in the case of a *machine* now mimicking marks on a clay pot that were originally made by the human hand. In such a case, it would be more appropriate to mass produce the pots from moulds but to *decorate* them by hand. The final cost of the item would increase due to labour costs, but the added value of hand decorating will compensate for this as the potential buyer sees that the decorations on each pot are hand made and therefore unique. Importantly, jobs are created and decorative skills exercised and preserved. There is then a healthy balance between the use of mechanical means (such as mould technology) and the skills and unique marks made by the human hand.

Large scale production of this nature allows a crafted item to be produced in sufficient volumes that would justify an order from major chain stores and support jobs. Indeed, there are historical precedents for manufacturing crafts in this way.

At a major countrywide South African retail chain store, a pile of glazed ceramic bowls were on display. They were all the same size as a result of being cast from moulds. However, it was apparent that the bowls were hand glazed and the surface decoration, as simple as it was, was also applied by hand. If a number of these individually decorated bowls were to grace a dinner table, the small but clearly visible differences that resulted from the hand application to the product will be detected by the viewer. (The human mind is adept at detecting breaks in patterns). If the same ceramic was machine molded, machine glazed and

machine decorated, the brain will easily detect a sterility or “sameness” in the finished product.

The Life and Development of a Crafted Product. Preserving Authenticity

Every hand-crafted or partially hand-crafted product that is exported from one country to another and finds itself on the shelves of a major chain store (and therefore is produced in large volumes) had humble beginnings as a product that was made in small volumes, providing work for a very small number of people.

The appropriate intervention of technology and mechanisation is a natural step that occurs at a stage in the lifetime of the growth of any crafted product. One reason for technological intervention is to reduce or eliminate the repetitive and therefore dehumanising aspects of the manufacturing process. This freeing up of human beings from this sort of drudgery allows them to participate in the more creative areas of the manufacturing process.

Mould making is an example of the appropriate intervention of technology in the casting of paper mache fish where the value of the fish as a crafted object is in its *surface decoration* and not nearly so much in the actual form of the fish. By casting the fish in moulds, a number of human beings are freed from the drudgery of shaping 1000s of fish by hand. The product yield rate is greatly increased through the mould making process and thus many more orders can be filled with obvious economic benefits.

The freed human hands can now be engaged in more meaningful activity such as decorating or on any other part of the production process. It is vital to apply technology appropriately and selectively and by so doing reserve those parts of the product that need to be made entirely by hand, for the application of the hand, such as in decorating the surface of a product. The product may be moulded but if the handmade surface decoration was to be substituted for decoration by applying printed transfers of the same decoration, the product would lose its handmade appeal that drew attention to it in the first place.

There is definitely a way to produce a product in large volumes while at the same time preserving the handmade elements that are crucial to the appeal and authenticity of the product. For example, a ceramic plate that wishes to qualify as a crafted product may be cast in moulds instead of thrown on a wheel, but the surface decorations need to be applied entirely by hand. Obviously if the ceramic was to be both thrown on the wheel *as well as* hand decorated, it would command a far greater price, but appeal to a smaller and more select market. A craft factory that makes use of the former process will employ many more people and sell far more ceramic ware to a greater audience. One is not saying that the one process is better than the other. They are different and have different markets. It would not be correct to argue that the entirely hand made item is somehow a “purer” form of craft.

Craft in the Market. The Application of Sound Business Principles

Retail chain stores the world over stock crafts which are handmade in the ways described above. India, China, Italy and Spain, to name but a few countries, produce crafted items in large volumes. In South Africa today, the challenge is to produce crafts in a similar fashion. This will mean more jobs for more people, from involvement in the actual making of the items, to packaging, selling and merchandising.

India has had decades of experience to establish a crafts industry according to sound economic and business principles. This crafts industry exports to countries in all of the continents. The broadening of the application of sound business principles to craft production is the next challenge for the craft industry in South Africa. The principle of large scale or mass production is now being seen as a necessary part of the process of growth in the development of crafts. The process of expansion of the production facility is a natural one and must occur when the product resonates with the market. When the product is welcomed by the market, the demand for it increases proportionately and consequently, production must increase. Quality assurance is crucial at this point as the quality is at risk of falling due to obvious pressures. The challenge is to put the necessary mechanisms in place in order to maintain quality and protect the original integrity of the crafted product.

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