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## Crafts in the Contemporary Creative Economy

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**Abstract.** Speaking generically of crafts from an economic point of view means referring to a field that encompasses different sectors and professions, an agglomeration of very different activities in terms of economic structure, performance and needs. This paper, however, aims to analyse only some of the artisan worlds, i.e. traditional trades, art & crafts which, even if manifesting themselves today in new ways, interest us more than others because of *the genius loci* they have subsumed. This is because this is the main feature that allows us to count on their survival in a present and in a future in which even large industries are looking with great interest at limited and customized production, and where not only major companies but also local and regional entities are rediscovering activities closely related to the “sense of place”, such as crafts, and including them in their identity branding policies. After an introductory look at the role of craftsmanship today in the “creative economy”, the paper describes the problems facing this productive and cultural sector today and outlines the challenges for the near future.

**Keywords.** Crafts, creative economy, globalization, innovation.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

It seems increasingly difficult, nowadays, to say what crafts are. Difficult from many perspectives: economic, social, linguistic. Crafts are a fundamental part of the culture of a community: the form of its products and their functions are often the result of the local presence of specific raw materials, of traditional knowledge and behaviors, beliefs and convictions that the objects incorporate and bear witness to. In this sense, there is the temptation of extending the category to include any production in which an initial project is translated into a finished object, whether this comes out of the workshop of a master ceramist, the factory of a luxury multinational or the studio of a designer.

Also the use of man-held tools, which traditionally distinguished crafts from industry, along with the size of the company, now seems to have lost some of its importance. New developments in technology, on the one hand, have generated a novel species of artisans, as

in the case of the makers, on the other hand, have helped establish a new “handmade” industry (as in the case of 3D planning in artistic foundries), in what some have called to be a new industrial revolution (Anderson [2012]).

The complexity of the crafts realm is due not only to semantic and historical reasons - but also has cultural and economic motivations, as widely covered by academic literature (Pye [1968]; Bologna [1972]; Dormer [1997]; Risatti [2007]): the terms craftsman, artisan and craft are used throughout the world with different meanings and the socio-economic status of craftsmen also varies considerably.

Defining the craft sector, at least from the economic standpoint, is therefore a threefold problem as it regards the classification of crafts, craftsmen and craft enterprises. Within the crafts realm we find economic subjects that differ greatly in terms of activity and organizational structure. Therefore, to stake out the borders of this economic sector and its size it is particularly complex. Even its visibility is sometimes uncertain given that while some top professions «are integrated in large-sized productive *filière* [...], many have transformed taking forms that make them unrecognizable for those who look for them expecting their usual aspect» (Colombo [2007]: 19).

Beyond the defining difficulties, however, in the new millennium crafts seem to have become of interest once again. This interest occurred at many levels, and at a global scale. In the academia and in research, a growing literature has dealt with the status of craftsmen in contemporary society (Sennet [2008]), with the present and future role of crafts in global value chains (Micelli [2009], [2011]), with the relevance and contribution of the craft sector to the economy (Mignosa, Kotipalli [2019]) on the relation between crafts, design and industry (Maffei [2011]; De Giorgi, Germak [2008]) and also with the crafts' centrality to contemporary art (Adamson [2007]).

The renewed interest in crafts does not concern academics only but also a number of important cultural institutions that have taken on the role of calling attention to the issue: the exhibit

*Power of Making*, held at the Victoria and Albert Museum of London in 2011 is probably one of the best examples, as it is the 2018 edition of *Homo Faber* at the prestigious Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice, which attracted more than 60 thousand visitors from all over the world, as well as the strong presence of crafts in the most prominent international Design Weeks around the world.

The reasons for this new vitality are many and result from the profound transformations that have been characterizing the economic system: the transition from a monolithic culture of industrialization to a culture founded on differentiation and specificity (De Giorgi, Germak [2008]), the crisis of certain local systems of production on the one hand, and on the other hand the development of new industrial systems based on interdependent relations of production and on outsourcing, the rise of the knowledge economy and of the creative economy, the changes in the domain of design and production. Furthermore, in the face of the homologation brought about by mass production and globalization, there has been a change in the taste and demands of consumers towards products characterized by quality and uniqueness. Taste and demands to which artisans are in a better position to respond to.

Within this context, crafts are gaining increased visibility and recognition thanks to their key features (Bramanti [2012]): value of work and individual quality of know-how; «culture-tradition-innovation» triptych, that is, the capacity of the craftsman to «combine tacit and codified knowledge, action and thought, experience and abstract knowledge, production and creation»; entrepreneurship and business risk, that is the desire to face the challenges of the market.

All these elements then found in the Web Economy unprecedented for visibility and for accessing the market, just think at marketplaces such as Etsy.com; Amazon Handmade and many others.

## 2. THE ROLE OF CRAFTS IN THE “CREATIVE ECONOMY”

The complexity and variety of the craft's world made that even the measurement of its economic

importance has always been very difficult, this also hindering the possibility of good cross-country analyses.

Data on production, in terms both of quantities produced and of the labour force involved, are incomplete for many countries, and in many areas of the world a large part of the crafts' production and trade still lies in the informal economy.

The greatest boost in the sourcing of up-to-date and reliable figures on crafts unquestionably occurred with the growing interest, in recent years, in the creative economy and in what are known as the "cultural industries".

According to the definition of Britain's Department of Culture Media e Sport (2001), creative industries are «those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property». Moreover, creative industries include «advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer services, television and radio».

Starting from the mid-nineties, the economic value generated by the creative goods and services production industries and the potential growth of the macro-sector compared to others has turned the spotlight onto the creative economy and driven the systemisation of knowledge of this macro sector. This attention, starting from the English-speaking world, spread quickly to all the advanced economies and to the developing countries during the 2000s, with the creation of a global debate and giving life to a myriad of studies intended to delimit and quantify the creative economy: not an easy operation given the considerable dynamism and variety of the industries that characterise it. Moreover, many international organisations like UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, UNCTAD, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and the UNDP – the United Nations Development Programme – have

joined the debate, dedicating important surveys, publications and programmatic documents to the creative economy both in an attempt to quantify world trade in creative goods and services, and to present their own institutional viewpoints on the subject.

The problem of sourcing reliable data for crafts emerged immediately and, in an effort to bridge this knowledge gap, various projects were launched, particularly by UNESCO and the UNCTAD, both through greater sensitization of individual countries with regard to the coding of artisan products, and through ad hoc studies of particular aspects of the crafts sector, such as, for example, its relationship with the tourism sector (UNESCO/UNCTAD-WTO, 1997) and with the intellectual property rights management (WIPO, 2003).

The process has been slow and produced so far contrasting results but which, in the end, made it possible to delimit and define the crafts sector more precisely and to compile a list of the most commonly traded products at world level, the economic importance of which are recognized by UNESCO and codified in accordance with an international classification system (Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding Systems).

According to the most recent data available when this paper was written, at global level, in 2015, the international trade in art craft totalled 35 billion dollars. The global market for art craft was expanding with an annual average growth rate of 4.42% during the period 2003-2015 and art crafts continue to be among the most important creative industry for export earnings for developing countries (UNCTAD, 2018).

These data offer a picture - albeit blurred - of the international trade in crafts goods. As already mentioned, however, the interest in the sector goes beyond these numbers, and concerns more strategic aspects relating to innovation processes in the production and consumption of goods and services with high added value.

Craftsmen often have a leading role also in the success of many important companies in the high-end industries (i.e. fashion, design etc.),

which entrust to them not only the more delicate phases of production but also the promotion of their image on international markets. This type of contribution of the culture of crafts to contemporary economy is much more complex to trace and quantify.

### 3. SURVIVAL ISSUES IN THE GLOBALIZED ECONOMY

Despite these positive data and this renewed interest, many craft businesses are currently exposed to a series of threats which endanger their survival. On the one hand, globalization has given fresh impulse to the creation of a global economy of culture and to mass consumption of cultural products, promoting also particular types of traditional artisanal products and crafts. On the other hand, however, globalization has also led to fierce competition based on production costs, as well as to the development of fake products that have critically undermined the revenues of many craft businesses (Friel and Santagata, 2007).

Alongside these macro factors and global tendencies, there are also a number of other factors, some of them cyclical and some of them structural, which negatively affect the profitability and, in some cases, the survival of artisanal activities. These factors include (Friel and Saccone [2012]):

- *Access to markets.* Traditionally, crafts and artistic crafts catered to local needs. Today, instead, with the development of globalization and the integration of world markets, the local market had been joined by the opportunity of accessing global markets. These changes, on the one hand, require new approaches and, on the other hand, require adapting products to the demands and needs of a heterogeneous public, both in terms of income and of taste. Artistic craftsmanship is mostly targeted at a niche of consumers, who are affluent and willing to purchase high-level products, on a national and international level. However, a significant quota of artistic craftsmen is having difficulty with these new market challenges. Not all are able to enter this market, which,

although potentially very lucrative, requires good marketing skills. The potential for artistic crafts targeted at this developing market and these new tendencies cannot be ignored and requires new solutions for accessing markets, enhancing local reputation in the face of global competition, as well as technological innovations capable of sustaining production and distribution (Santagata and Friel [2007]). If these solutions are found, elite artistic crafts and more traditional ones will be able to capture significant market quotas. The question is therefore how to expand the market for crafts, favour access to new markets and exploit global tendencies.

There is also a third way to create innovative and modern products and gain access to markets that is currently developing, largely stimulated by the changes in the domain of design. We are talking about self-production, in which the designer becomes the director of the whole process, from invention, to production, to distribution.

Self-production is an interesting phenomenon and even though at the moment it has more to do with design than with crafts, in the future it could become a bridge between these two worlds, combining the strategic and innovative capacities of designers with the manual and constructive skills of artisans. For the time being, it is still unclear whether this is a transient phenomenon or a lasting structural transformation. According to artist Paolo Ulian, self-production and crafts will play an increasingly greater role in design in the coming years, because the number of young designers is increasing, while the number of design companies is decreasing.

- *Information and qualification of the demand.* Even when there is a sufficient number of consumers with the right income level, the artistic and highly idiosyncratic nature of craft objects can limit the demand for them, since, their value, and therefore their price, can only be recognized with an adequate cultural background and adequate information. As noted by Bramanti (2012), «an uneducated customer is unlikely to accept a premium price for craft objects and / or will automatically place it in the niche of luxury goods where

it competes (at a disadvantage) with branded goods».

The deadly effects on the crafts' market produced by consumers' incomplete information on the quality of the products and on the traditional knowledge that they embed, have been widely analysed by cultural economic literature with regard for example to Murano glass production in Venice, pashmina shawls and many others (Stephen [1991]; Santagata [2002]; Russo, Segre [2005]).

The ability to know how to communicate the products, and the choice of the best means to do so, constitutes today a strategic issue that requires economic and human capital investments by individual craftsmen or their representatives.

- *Access to credit.* Typically, crafts' businesses are characterized by small size and little capital and, for this reason, access to credit is a greater problem for them compared to other businesses. Without the support of institutions that believe in crafts and their potential for economic growth, it is unlikely that crafts will be able to adapt to new tendencies, given the capitals and investments required. An alternative is, for craftsmen without financial resources and access to credit, to become providers and collaborators of luxury industries, which have greater access to credit and to global markets, and which have already shown a strong interest in the potential of artistic and traditional crafts.

- *Knowledge transmission.* One of the great elements of fragility in the world of crafts is that of the transmission of technical and cultural knowledge at the basis of this type of production. The loss of skills not only undermines the survival of these activities, but also weakens the production of instrumental goods for the craft sector (for a detailed analysis see Paragraph 4), such as the production of particular materials, pigments and tools etc.

The root of these problems lies in the profound social, economic and cultural changes that have taken place in recent decades. On the one hand, the handing down of artisanal know-how "from father to son" has been interrupted, since

new generations tend to be interested in different studies and professions. On the other hand, the more institutionalized forms of training have proven inadequate, especially when it comes to transmitting many uncoded skills and notions.

- *Workshops and spaces.* Traditionally, at least in western countries, workshops were always located in the historical centre of towns, characterized by the proximity of housing and workplace. Today, the cost of real estate, the colonization process by global retail chains to have their flagship stores in historical buildings in the most central areas of cities is causing a decline in the presence of workshops and traditional stores.

In some cases, entire productive activities have been relocated to the periphery leaving only the store in the town centre. In other cases, small and extremely small workshops have chosen unofficial, less visible locations (Biondi [2011]). These tendencies are changing the look of urban centres and, more seriously, are diminishing the visibility of artisans, for whom workshops traditionally serve also as windows through which they market their work.

A partial answer to these problems has come from the flourishing of coworking spaces and makerspaces. This is an interesting phenomenon also due to the possible effects on product innovation processes deriving from multidisciplinary collaborations. This is why many countries are studying the phenomenon today with targeted research activities (Sleigh, Stewart, Stokes [2015]).

- *Preserving originality.* While traditional craft objects are often the result of the cultural and social identities of the communities that produce them and incorporate century-old notions and techniques, the appearance of the finished product can often be easily appropriated. Globalization has led to the widespread production of fakes and, once again, the cultural education of customers and their capacity to distinguish quality both in the production process and in the finished product is fundamental to protect original crafts. There is also a need for greater protection of intellectual property and originality in artisanal know-how. «Notwithstanding the fact that craft products are

often assimilated to artistic creations, the majority of people does not acknowledge their right to intellectual property» (Howkins [2001]). Furthermore, in many artistic crafts there are no quality labels that artisans can adhere to in order to certify and communicate to customers the value of their creation.

- *Dynamic innovation / tradition*. Despite the undisputed quality and value of artistic craft products, sometimes artisans, in their understandable desire to preserve tradition, remain faithful to models that have changed little over time. This can lead to a gap between the aesthetics of the product and consumer taste. Tradition is not static and the production of culture, in all its forms, is a cumulative and innovative process, especially in the case of goods and services that compete in a market where taste and demand are changing at an increasingly rapid pace. This problem also suggests the opportunity of a closer dialogue between traditional artisans and designers, in which the latter could have the function of supporting the technical and artistic skills of artisans by providing new aesthetic forms, which would appeal also to the younger generations of customers.

#### 4. CRAFTS AND SUPPORT MICRO-SERVICES: A COMPLEX SYSTEM

The above described problems highlight the profound connections that craft production has not only with the territories on which production insists and with global value chains, but also with a series of other production and service activities that support the sector. These micro-services can be described as «the structure that makes creativity and culture sustainable», including material culture, «because they localize them and the benefits, they produce in a given area» (Bertacchini, Santagata [2012]: 27). Any consideration on the economic and cultural importance of crafts today should therefore also include an analysis of this wider world.

Figure 1 summarizes some of the most important services and micro-services supporting crafts' value chain, which can be synthetically arranged

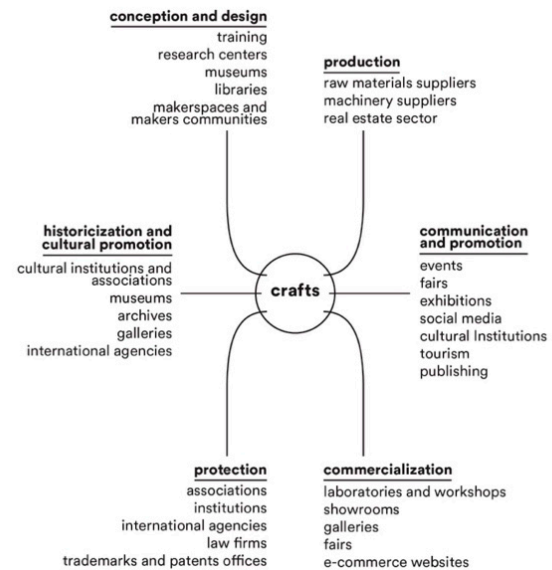


Figure 1. Crafts' filière: support services and micro-services.

in six macro-classes: conception and design; production; communication and promotion; commercialization; protection; historicization.

An examination of these categories will shed light on how interactions between activities that, while disaggregated, are strongly interconnected, plays an important role both from a cultural and economic point of view (Bertacchini, Santagata [2012]:27).

1) *Conception and design*. The support system to conception and design should be seen as a set of cultural infrastructures, services and activities ranging from research and training centres to libraries and museums, from archives to territorial cooperation networks. These places and services have the task on one hand of bringing out creative and entrepreneurial talents, on the other of inspiring and supporting their activity.

2) *Production*. The production support system extends to include, in addition to other artisan businesses operating in coplanar fields (such as an artistic foundry for sculpture or a furnace for working with ceramics), a whole series of mold makers, turners, plasticizers, computer scientists, etc. Then there is the wide world of makerspaces and fablabs that often welcome and support the production of traditional crafts.

3) - 4) *Promo-commercialization*. How is craftsmanship communicated today? What services does communication require? On this phase we find both more traditional services and digital and innovative tools. Among the first, there are initiatives such as workshops, fairs but also exhibitions hosted by cultural institutions. Among the latter, we find the services related to the design and development of new tools and platforms of online promotion and commerce (websites, apps etc.). Another interesting area to consider is that of cross-sectoral collaborations such as those with the tourism industry with initiatives and projects aimed at offering experiences to travellers in artisan shops and promoted through online booking engines, online travel agencies and tourism professionals.

5) *Protection*. Protection can be understood in a broad way and involves the recognition and support of the professional figure of the craftsman, through the work of the institutions and trade associations.

At the local level, the services for the protection of craftsmen are available in various forms, from law firms to services offered by chambers of commerce and trade associations. An important role is also played, internationally, by some agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) or the International Labour Organization (ILO). The intellectual property protection services obviously do not only concern the product but also process or product innovations relating, for example, to the use of new materials.

6) *Historicization and cultural promotion*. This is a relatively “new” phenomenon in the crafts’ world: some traditional products due to their historic value, to their idiosyncratic nature or aesthetic value are being showcased in museums and exhibitions. A number of cultural institutions are nowadays specifically committed in valorizing traditional knowledge and traditional craft’s practices.

The role of these institutions, as places of inspiration and dialogue between past and future, can be interpreted in a twofold way: function-

al not only to the historical settling and to the memorial maintenance of craftsmanship but also to its development.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Today craftsmen are regarded, in many countries, as the model for economic resurgence, thanks to their ability to combine local productive know how, technological research, knowledge of materials, and the ability to personalize products.

There is, however, no agreement on what the craftsman of the future should be. At least two schools of thought exist (Friel, Saccone [2012]). Some observers argue that, if left to themselves, craftsmen will be less and less able to meet market challenges, and thus foresee their gradual inclusion as OEMs in small or middle-sized creative companies, or absorption in the productive processes of the great luxury brands. Advocates of this hypothesis cite many success stories around the world. This debate, for example, appears to be particularly lively in countries such as Italy (Micelli [2011]) where traditional craft practices have been very much valorised by “Made in Italy” fashion and furniture design companies.

The second scenario, instead, is one of independent artisanal workshops working on a short supply-chain. To survive, however, these craftsmen must overcome the challenges described in the previous section, from the loss of traditional knowledge to price competition and difficulties in communicating the cultural and technical values embodied in their products.

This alternative vision of the “craftsman of the future” finds interesting echoes in the world of design. The independent craftsman has become the hub of the new paradigm of design that we mentioned above, which is centered on self-production. Over the last few years, design, also intended as a strategic approach to innovation, has led to the rise of new manufacturing companies, the growth of small to middle-size companies that started out as local workshops, and the transformation of artisanal activities, steering them

towards a renewal of their products and of their communication strategies.

Of course, these two scenarios are complementary rather than alternative. In any case, it seems beyond doubt that, to survive and earn the role it deserves in our economic and cultural fabric, the artistic crafts sector will have to face these challenges, choose its path, and integrate its tradition into the new local, national and global trends.

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