LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Crafts Versus a Technological Civilization

Sir:

Herwin' Shaefer's article in the spring issue of the COLLEGE ART JOURNAL entitled *The Metamorphosis of the Craftsman* deserves a reply. There is no argument over Mr. Shaefer's main contention:

"The inexorable laws of economics and the realities of our technical world are forcing more and more individuals of creative ability to other careers than that of craftsmen, who in an earlier age would have become craftsmen."

Yes, this is so. The kind of valuing that has created our social-political-economic-cultural fabric *does* force an increasing number of individuals into technical or related fields.

I'm not so sure about the "inexorable laws" part of it. So many things that we call inexorable laws are part of a system of ideas that go to make up a particular ideology. We feel more comfortable about accepting the ideology if we call the principles on which we build it "inexorable" or "reality".

The study of art should make us aware that in man's search for Reality his ideologies represent the mode under certain historic conditions in which living men went about meeting their needs, defining their ends and expressing themselves. The arts and crafts (among which industrial forms are of course included) are perhaps the richest symbolic expression of man's valuings. His values are his spiritual tools for grappling with that eternal unknown—Reality. Science and religion become inextricably bound up in the concretization of the arts too, as John Alford's article in the same issue so illuminatingly demonstrated.

In a predemocratic era, it was not uncommon for kings to suppress inventions that would disturb the balanced relationship within the community of crafts. Industrialists in our democratic era suppress inventions for their own reasons, as well as encourage them.

"You auto buy now" highlights the fact that in our current industrialized society rapid obsolescence is "crafted" into the production scheme, and it makes clear that some of our "creative" tastemakers in industry have lost touch with the great unwashed public—and it is not just a matter of fins on the fenders, or a plethora of taillights.

"You auto buy now" highlights another fact: that in our highly technical society, headed steadily toward automation, for every fourteen men displaced by machinery on the production line, nine new men are needed on the distribution line—in advertising, clerking, inventorying, transporting, warehousing, etc. Creative work? The new craftsman?

Eric Fromm, among others, in *Man For Himself* and *The Sane Society,* has pointed out the nature of the salesman's personality orientation vs. the productive personality, and the danger to society and human values in the increase of the former over the latter. Isn't there the fundamental problem of the relation of the product to the production process that Mr. Schaefer ignores here?

What was most irritating to this reader was the smug peroration to Mr. Schaefer's essay; "Let us put things and people in their proper places and acknowledge our world for what it is. . . . Let us recognise the compelling reality of our industrial world . . . and let us honor the men who are doing a good job and are thereby craftsmen in the only real sense of the word."

Fundamentally, the reply that Mr. Schaefer deserves lies in the realm of definitions and values, not in statistics. Mr. Schaefer assumes that the machine is the

new tool and therefore the technician and the designer is the new craftsman. Nowhere in this article does he attempt to define either tool or craftsman, so perhaps we might best start there.

Eric Gill some time ago gave definitions for the distinction between tool and machine that still seem fundamental and genuine to me. A tool is an implement that helps a man do his work. A machine is an implement that a man helps do its work. The craftsman is the skilled and responsible workman who makes well what needs being made. The factory hand is the skilled tender of the machine that makes well what needs being made.

Now the distinction here is one of relationship—the relationship between a man to the work done. The craftsman is always intimately involved with the tool, the material process, the finished object. He is always involved in a threeway process, one of imagineering (be it rocking chair, rocket, or foreign policy), one of organization, one of execution. He is involved as a whole person, intellectually and physically in the process of making, so that the finished object is the product of a man. In the making of such an object a man can take pride. For such an object a man can be responsible.

The distinction between tool and machine is not one of speed. It is a matter of orientation to the work process. The belt system of production turned many tools into machines. The electric motor and electronics has released many machines to the status of tool again, potentially. The problem mainly is one of ideology. The complex mechanical computers are tools for speeding the process of assimiliating and coordinating data for the scientist. They are not machines for thinking.

I can illustrate this difference with two stories from Mexico. Some years ago an American firm established a serape factory in Tlaquepaque near Guadalajara, one of the rich craft centers in Mexico. Local weavers and their sons were hired to man the looms to produce colorful adaptations of Mexican patterns that could sell well on the American market. Exhausted at the end of the day as industrial "hands" the older men, raised within a vital craft tradition, went home to weave on their old looms serapes for themselves and their community according to their own designs. This was their re-creation. They had no use for the product they made for commercial sale. The younger generation, alienated from their traditional past, gathered at the pulquerias for their recreation.

The second story is told of Mrs. Dwight Morrow when her husband was Ambassador to Mexico. She had wanted a dozen dining room chairs. She found one she liked, asked the craftsman who made it how much it was and was given a price. She said she wanted a dozen exactly like it. What would be the price on a dozen chairs?

The craftsman did some figuring and came up with a price substantially higher than twelve times the price for the one chair. Mrs. Morrow expressed surprise and said that in the United States one often got a lower price for twelve of a kind because it meant less work to make twelve things alike. One never paid a higher price than the unit price. The old craftsman replied that he did not see why he should not be paid extra for the boredom of making twelve things exactly alike.

Several years ago I went through the Pyrex Division of the Corning Glass Factory. There at the powerful lathes where the mold for the Pyrex glass shapes were being cut with beautiful and amazing precision were the skilled "craftsmen." They were sitting down reading magazines, while the machines cut the steel. Their work was to set the machine up, watch it, feed it, and remove the product when the machine was done.

Yet I do not doubt (if one can trust Elton Mayo's statistics in *Human Problems of an Industrial Civilisation*) that these men left their relatively short shift at the machines more exhausted and depleted, who gave only part of themselves to their work, than the Mexican cabinet maker who wanted less money for more work, provided he could use inventiveness and imagination in following the wood and his own exuberance in working out

each of the twelve chairs. His chairs were intended to stay in style and strong for at least the next generation or two. He recognised no problem of obsolence. Real human love and engagement, as the existentialists like to call it, is never obsolete.

The attitudes toward work and product of a technical point of view are control, efficiency, duplicability, perfection.

The attitudes toward work and product of a human point of view are power, expression, individuality, and love.

These aims are not necessarily antagonistic, but they are not synonymous.

Thorstein Veblen, as long ago as 1911, recognised the tension that exists between purely technical considerations and fundamental human needs. In his *Instinct of Workmanship* he wrote of the emerging problems of our industrial world: "The training given by the current state of the industrial arts is a training in the impersonal, quantitative apprehension and appreciation of things, and it tends strongly to inhibit and discredit all imputation of spiritual traits to the facts of observation. It is training in matter of fact; more specifically it is training in the logic of the machine process. Its outcome obviously should be an unqualified materialistic and mechanica-animus in all orders of society, most pronounced in the working classes since they are most consistently exposed to the discipline of the machine process.

But such an animus that best comports with the logic of the machine process, does not, it appears, for good or ill, best comport with the native strain of human nature of those people who are subject to its discipline.

In all the various peoples of Christendom there is a visible straining against the drift of the machine's teachings, rising at times and in given classes of the population to the pitch of revulsion."

The Arts and Crafts movement of the Victorian period? Pathetic Mr. Morris? Pathetic Mr. Ashbee? Could this be one of the signs of strain rising to the pitch of revulsion?

Let us give the arts and crafts movement its due. The ferment that such men as Welby Pugin, William Morris, and John Ruskin started went on to influence Van de Velde, Mondrian, and Gropius. The Bauhaûs is an outgrowth of neo-medievalist principles—a giant step in the attempt to reestablish the integrity of work. There was the attempt to bridge the gap between technical thinking and beaux art thinking which had gone on in Europe, since David as dictator of art education after the French revolution, had set the pace by keeping the technical and trade schools separate from the Ecole des Beaux Arts. These groups also dislike the ultimate "esthetic" craft object which Mr. Schaefer so rightly deplores—the bottle with no opening, but that is not the central problem of a craft vs. a technological civilization.

We who are in college teaching positions have a tremendous responsibility to the generations who pass through our hands—a responsibility to awaken their perceptions and the grounds on which they rest so that their judgments are firmly founded that they may have confidence in them—to make them aware of the consequences of values—to make them aware that beauty is a consequence of health, a bloom of life, and to make them hunger for it. Eventually these young people will be in positions of power where value decisions are made.

We who are concerned with art must be concerned with the conditions and social relations from which art springs and which governs its fruits. Jackson Pollock, Fritz Winter, Franz Kline, and Soulages, to mention only a representative few, who work under the banner of tachism or action painting, what does this development mean? What value must we place on the current drift? What states of soul in modern man do these forms reflect? Toward what do they point? What areas of esthetic response do they call forth from the observer? Painting is always saying something about the soul of man in tension with historic process. It behooves us to read well what the signs of the times are.

Technologically perfect thermonuclear war is just moments away from achieve-

ment—crafted by the designers and technicians who are "doing a good job." Our missiles and planes are exciting examples of technological perfection. In terms of the amount of national treasure which we invest in them, these are the objects for which we are willing to pay that little bit more for a dozen all alike.

Mr. Schaefer says that all would be well if these anachronistic artsey craftsey people would stop dragging their heels on the cart of progress.

My argument here is that there is heroic pathos in the arts and crafts movement, and that the real dangers to our civilisation lie within the drift—the "inexorable" drift of the unanalysed totally technological point of view.

WILLIAM DARR
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Sir:

Mr. Herwin Schaefer and his critically worded "The Metamorphosis of The Craftsman," (*CAJ*, XVII, 3, Spring, 1958) has raised many questions that remain unanswered and has dealt primarily with generalities that unfairly present his biased views on the crafts.

The strong forward movement in the Designer-Craftsman area in the past few years has proven that it remains one of the few areas of expression in our time that have not lost sight of purpose and direction. Other areas within the arts have exploited their medium to such a degree that only a blind alley lies ahead. The craftsmen resent the minor role some critics label the crafts. Are the crafts and their contemporary expression any less contributing and creatively impelled than that of painting and sculpture? Has the very bad craftsmanship that prevails in the painting and sculpture area a greater legitimacy because it is in the area of *fine arts*? Our position of importance is facing close scrutinization and unwelcomed, unconstructive criticism, but our place will be strengthened by the very fact that this new giant is commanding attention. The craftsman of today is not attempting to recapture the values of the handicraft age in our everyday objects, but since every generation produces its own values and directions, we are vitally concerned with contemporary challenges as they relate to our own time with new and old materials. The crafts are to be no longer considered as a minor art form but an area of expression that will demand and receive equal consideration with other areas within the *fine arts*.

PAUL P. HATGIL
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Sir,

I agree with Professor Schaefer that poor design and craftsmanship evidence themselves frequently in craft exhibitions. I agree, too, that his paper displays the same qualities he ascribes to "artworkers." He seems to need confirmation of his worth, or academic advancement, in writing his article. Professor Schaefer seems to have raised his nose from his history books only long enough to take a quick glance at a few handicrafted pieces. If it is not his ignorance, then it must be his insincerity in using the illustrations he did, to infer that such objects were representative of what craftsmen are doing in America, Europe, or Japan.

The craftsman of today *has* realized that the world has been changed by technology and democracy. He knows what junk is offered to the consumer by the factories using the latest technological means. Does Professor Schaefer know what kind of jewelry or ceramics the stores sell? How many commercially made cups have ears that can be comfortably held with the fingers? How many that show any feeling for form or decoration? How many original fashion designs do we have? If industry has "pre-empted the purposeful production of objects for use," it has done so without using taste, and in many instances, without knowledge of function. The need for artist-craftsmen to supply everyday objects that are beautiful to look at, and comfortable to use, is greater than ever. Some amateurs and dilettantes do exhibit poor work. Does that justify Professor Schaefer's generalization that all craftsmen of today are producing "not only useless, but for the most part bad