

***Craft: An American History*, Glenn Adamson, Bloomsbury, 2021. 400 pp., b&w illus. with 8 page col. insert, cloth, US \$40.49. ISBN: 9781635574586.**

Glenn Adamson is no stranger to writing large, ambitious books about craft. But *Craft: An American History* is in many ways his most significant book published to date, because of the way in which he approaches craft in the context of American history. As Adamson notes, although there is emerging maturity in scholarly work on craft, there has not been, until now, ‘a single overview of craft in America’ (p. 2). However *Craft* is no mere catalogue of craft achievements in the United States. This is, first and foremost, a re-telling of the major narratives of American history, demonstrating how, at every step, craft was a vital and significant factor. Adamson reveals how craft was (and still is) an active element in American political discourse, in paid and unpaid labour, in war, in economics, and, crucially, he explores its implication in matters of class, race and gender. Put another way, *Craft* pushes us to fundamentally rethink what we think we know about American history *and* about craft, showing that although craft is regularly marginalised, denigrated and misunderstood, it is also deeply contested, highly politicised and integral to wider historical patterns.

Adamson’s definition of craft is simple, but carefully considered: ‘whenever a skilled person makes something using their hands, that’s craft.’ (p. 2). This definition hides its sophistication. It means that discussions about craft should involve an engagement with paid and unpaid labour, as well as its relation to education, technology, skill, materials, the objects themselves, in addition to craft’s practical and symbolic capacity. Taking an essentially chronological approach, Adamson explores craft in a great many phases of American history: from Native American practices before and during white colonisation / invasion, through to craft’s role in the Civil War, and in the Reconstruction period. Craft is traced through the industrial revolution, through twentieth century wartime and peacetime, through the influence

of the New Deal, through booming post-Second World War consumerism and DIY culture, and through political movements for civil rights, feminism and counter-cultures. The book concludes with recent and contemporary developments, such as activist uses of craft (craftivism), and craft revitalisations through maker communities and small-scale artisanal businesses. This list is not comprehensive, and *Craft* includes other historical moments. Over time, craft is shown to become more economically marginal, but no less relevant to American politics and culture.

Craft opens with a well-known portrait of silversmith John Revere by John Singleton Copley, which Adamson uses as a vector to convey the major ideological tenets of American self-identification: 'clarity, pragmatism and self-sufficiency' (p. 12), within which craft has potent representational force. Adamson illuminates the contradictory and flawed nature of these ideals. Beginning with a focus on white colonial artisans, the contingent nature of class position is always kept in view. By way of a counterpoint, Adamson explores the differing understandings of the Wampanoag nation's wampum beads, highlighting both the tremendous skill required to make wampum, but also its sophisticated representational use (both elements were essentially ignored by fiscally motivated white interpretations of wampum).

The general pattern of the book is to introduce selected craft personalities, alongside key historical vignettes. Each chapter is heavy with examples, and at times it can begin to feel like a long list, but whenever the reader may be close to tiring, Adamson seems to know when to bring in broader analysis to situate and drive the text. The artisans profiled are many and various (men and women, Native American, African American, white and immigrant), but key themes emerge quickly. First, he demonstrates how craft can easily become bound up with the individualistic American ideal of the 'self-made man', a concept strongly critiqued.

Adamson frequently looks for examples of collectivism in artisanal labour, but is often disappointed by the strength of American individualism, which seems to reassert itself even at times of extreme financial hardship, such as the Panic of 1837. The case of the Knights of Labour in the late nineteenth century is one rare example where, at its best, craft collectivity sought ‘big tent’ solidarity, including women, African Americans and migrants, artisans and labourers alike. This is juxtaposed with the American Federation of Labour’s (AFL) style of craft unionism, which defensively restricted ‘skilled’ craft, generally for white craftsmen.

The tension between the hand and the machine is, of course, a pervasive theme. Adamson does not present a binary or oppositional relationship, but an interconnectivity and sometimes contradictory tension: at every step, manual practices and technology are bound up with complex systems of labour and production, whether this occurs in the home, factory or workshop. This materialises particularly strongly in Adamson’s discussions of the American iterations of the Arts and Crafts movement. The long-known contradictions of the Arts and Crafts are given fresh life through lively descriptions of key protagonists such as Candace Wheeler, Gustav Stickley and the ‘entertainingly self-aggrandizing’ Elbert Hubbard (p. 186). Also woven throughout *Craft* is refreshing and clear discussion of some core labour history concepts, such as: the division of labour, mass-production, cottage industry piecework, Scientific Management, and the Fordist assembly line. Adamson’s critique of Frederick Winslow Taylor would be useful to set for undergraduates – it is short, witty and critical.

Adamson takes care to unpack how craft has been manipulated for racist ends, during slavery, and afterwards. For example, craft education was used a means to pacify and limit the opportunities for African Americans, and as a form of ‘assimilation’ for Native Americans, through the Tuskegee Institute and Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Many stories of African American and Native American artisans are shared, some better known

than others, including: Elizabeth “Lizzie” Keckley, Nampeyo, Maria and Julian Martinez, David Drake, Booker T. Washington, Thomas Day and James W.C. Pennington. But Adamson also reminds us of the *missing* narratives: there are a great many Native American, African American, immigrant and women artisans whose names and work remain unrecorded in official archives.

The interwoven complexities of class, skill and race also emerge in the book’s wide-ranging coverage of various forms of craft education (and with it, social intervention). In addition to the schools mentioned above, other craft-oriented schools, institutes and communities include Frances Wright’s Nashoba (slave emancipation community), Samuel Armstrong’s Hampton Institute, Lucy Calista Morgan’s Penland School of Handicrafts, and Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr’s Hull House (among others). Another key theme is the way in which craft has been employed in the service of utopian ideals, epitomised by Shaker craft, but also apparent in the Transcendentalists’ view of craft’s elevating role in life, and in Stuart Brand’s systems understanding in the *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968-1998).

Feminism too, occupies a fine-grained place in *Craft*. Adamson examines both women’s paid and unpaid craft labour, taking care to point out where women and children’s exploitation in factory and domestic outwork contexts has often been forgotten or ignored. The relationship of craft to gender construction is present in both discussions of idealised craftsmen’s masculinity, and through explanations of women’s conflicting visions for their role in society. The comparison of the engineer Emma Allison and butter sculptor Caroline Shawk Brooks at the 1876 Centennial Exposition is used as an example of the latter. In a section on working women during World War II, *Craft* reminds us of that tragic missed opportunity for gender equality in industrial and technical labour – marked by the *temporary* nature of women’s acceptance in heretofore male-dominated industries.

It is a sad reality of academic publishing that books such as these are not always as lavishly illustrated as they could be, and often this is beyond author control. At times I found myself using an online image search to accompany what I was reading. But the strength of *Craft* is its writing: as a text, it is a valuable model for deeply contextual and politically attuned writing about craft (and this holds lessons for design historians alike). To write with this depth of political and historical knowledge requires enormous amounts of research, as well as meticulous consideration given to the complex dynamics occurring in American history, *vis-a-vis* race, class and gender. At the centre of *Craft* is a nuanced understanding of the contradictory relations that emerge when craft encounters capital and power. In my experience this kind of political astuteness and sensitivity remains rare in writing about craft, and we need much more of it.

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