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CHAPTER

The power of making

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The words 'cutting edge' have never seemed more appropriate: one hundred and twenty objects that speak to the skill of crafting but which also seem to celebrate the joy of the contemporary, the unprecedented capacities of today. This is an exhibition with a simple message - go out and learn to make something, just because you can. Feel for yourself that sense of achievement and exhilaration when you see before you the finished object of your own labour, and how that object has in turn made you more than you otherwise had been.

At the same time this exhibition is an act of rejuvenation within the context of the Victoria and Albert Museum which at its core suffers from a paradox. The original title of this institution was not the Victoria and Albert Museum, but the Museum of Manufactures. It was dedicated to being and remaining cutting edge in the very same sense as The Power of Making. Its establishment created a niche that was not defined by craft - in the sense of a nostalgia for lost skills or work - but industrial arts which embraced the new potential of industrial manufacture and looked forward to carving out a terrain that was neither quite art nor industry but something in between. The museum was meant to educate its audience, but also to encourage a more democratised participation in design and technology.

To achieve this the Museum of Manufactures was intended not just to exhibit but also to inspire its visitors to push the boundaries of manufacture and envisage new worlds that would continue to delight future decades. These objects spoke to an unprecedented combination of labour, industrial power, inspiration and will. The subsequent paradox is that things within the museum become historical merely by virtue of remaining in time. Exactly the same objects that began life as direction signs to the future now sit on the same plinth representing memorabilia of the past. The world has sped past them and replaced the aura of promise with that of patina. If we want to regain and embrace that original spirit and intention it will be through temporary exhibitions such as The Power of Making, which has cast a net across the shoals of the present and exhibits objects still dripping with contemporaneity.

For this purpose there is no need to repudiate the past. One of the first objects we encounter in the exhibition is a dry stone wall, a reminder that most of our ancestors were involved in ordinary labour, mainly but not entirely associated with agriculture. We still meet and greet a litany of trades in the form of common English surnames. It's a pleasure to see you Mrs Cooper, a fine day Mr Sadler, well done Master Taylor, begging your pardon Ms Mason. Several of the objects on display speak to ancient craft such as damascene steel, which we continue to value in the finest kitchen knives.

There is, then, no suggestion that we should forget long centuries of skill and labour. Indeed these artisanal traditions are not separated out as memories. They are juxtaposed with contemporary decorative arts and also with a celebration of machines intended to

demonstrate the dynamism of industry, a future of machines that can make other machines. Nor should one be fooled into thinking that a printer that can take the simple drawing of a child and turn it into a three-dimensional object is just a toy. You see in such a tool a radical new future for industrial society. I strongly suspect that one day I will want to possess a 3D printer just as I presently cherish my smartphone. This single object, the 3D printer, represents perhaps the most profound challenge to what we call crafts today, because we will be able to make things with it that presently can only be created by hand. Yet this exhibition is co-sponsored by the Crafts Council. It is a sign that craft has flourished by embracing the ethos of the Museum of Manufactures rather than remaining aloof from industry.

There has always been a struggle for the heart of craft and it remains one of considerable importance, since it is a fight over the ideology of time itself. Craft can easily become a vehicle of nostalgia, whose primary purpose is not just to remind us of what we have lost but thereby to imply that we are diminished in our very humanity. Since the industrial revolution, there has been a mourning for the loss of manual labour and a belief that what we have gained in the wealth of industrial commodities has been at the expense of the human spirit. A 3D printer is the devil's gift, taking us still further from a glimpse of heaven. Such ideas seems designed to make us feel shallow and inauthentic by comparison with our ancestors, and probably increase rather than decrease our feelings of alienation.

This view was established through a genre of writing which goes back to the nineteenth century. From Morris to Ruskin and the Romantics, we have mourned our separation from labour. Even those with the best intentions and political motivation penned celebrations of manual labour that now seem pompous and leaden. The presumption was that the contemporary represents the end of a history of original craft that was richer and better. But the idea that once upon a pre-industrial time most people engaged in fulfilling manual labour is utter nonsense. Such writings tend to highlight those artisans, such as the very few jewellers, who had freedom to innovate and delight in their work, mainly because they served elites and rulers. But beneath these lay millions whose handiwork was limited to tasks such as dry stone walling or the hoops for making barrels. As an anthropologist I have lived for several years with non-industrial farmers and potters. Such people are engaged in making a given range of objects over a lifetime simply to feed their family. The modern ideals of creativity or fulfilment are simply not relevant in most cases. Working life is often as mindless and boring as serving any conveyor belt. And then, when your back is breaking from planting and weeding, or gathering clay and beating earth, unseasonal weather destroys the crop, or the wrong kiln temperature breaks the pots. I am not at all surprised that almost everyone I worked with wanted to give up farming and manual labour for work they saw as more rewarding, including factory work. This is not history this is the majority of today's world in China and India.

So a celebration of craft that denigrates industrial manufacture is an act of hypocrisy. It is precisely because we now have industry, where machines takes over so many boring and repetitive tasks, that those who have emerged from impoverishment can afford to celebrate craft as something we do for pleasure and leisure. Ideals of creativity and self-fulfilment grew with the machine age. The Power of Making is dominated by objects that speak to the sheer fun, imagination and brilliance of these new crafts that entice us to take part because we want to. They are not the results of manual labour required of us to put bread on the table. The spirit is closer to the fine British tradition of amateurism and the democratisation of skill,

so that we can all look for a niche or hobby. We can hone a skill to take pride in making things, and revel in work that has no clearly boundaries from the world of play. Many of these objects are present because of the way they show how skill can be used to have fun through mimicry, mockery, swapping one material for another unexpected alternative. We walk past the lace fence, the glass grenade, hand-crafted replica foods, 'glass' blowing using sugar, cars of bamboo, bikes from Swarovski crystal. We see people who just felt 'up' for the challenge of trying to make by hand things that we have just assumed could only be fashioned by machine, the handmade camera, a bicycle made by someone who has previously only made boats.

So I do not see The Power of Making as nostalgia for lost arts or a Luddite critique of industrial production. It doesn't seem to differentiate between, on the one hand, objects that require years of devotion and skill and, on the other, machines which ensure that even the ham-fisted and ill adept of us can make quite extraordinary things. Digital design and plastics can also be celebrated here for the capacities that they now give to us all. Because, truth be told, many of us would like to be involved in making things but would have been quite useless at many of the tasks on display here. The only thing we might have made is complete failures. I recall endless humiliations when I couldn't plane a piece of wood, failed to throw a pot, plucked the flowers and left the weeds, and was relegated to playing the triangle at school because I couldn't even keep up with playing the recorder. It was many years before I found some activities I was just about 'good enough' at to enjoy such as birthday cake decoration and writing. This exhibition shows us fantastic constructions at which we gawp in awe, but the reason I want a 3D printer is to make the things I would never have been able to produce otherwise, however strong my desire. Programming such a device with, for example, instructions to add some personal detail, could replace shopping for the generic.

The theme here, as in the original Museum of Manufactures, is rather the way industry, design and labour complement each other. It's a two way process. There are also objects on display here, such as hand-crocheted medical implants, where manufacturers have turned to hand-craft simply because machines cannot reproduce the intricacy and refined eye of a craft skill. But there is also a recognition that where once imagination and innovation was a luxury reserved for elites, today a garden shed can become the site for making replica medieval weapons from latex or wooden toys, turned on our own lathe, to give as Christmas presents to nieces and nephews.

The brilliance of the Museum of Manufactures, which I see reflected in The Power of Making, was that it steered a finely balanced course between two dangerous sirens, the music of industry on the one hand but also of art on the other. It learned their tunes but replayed them on its own new instruments. On the one hand, the museum respected and was sometimes in thrall to industry, but highlighted what were called the decorative arts that incorporated the more imaginative skills of design and craft and opened them up for us all. But it also faced the other way, in respecting art but envisaging another much more democratic potential than that found within the rarefied realms of art itself. When we refer to the power of making it, there are actually two meanings to the words to 'make it.' One seems rather more modest - merely informing you that it was my labour, time and effort. The other, which seems to be increasingly common, is when 'I made it' is a claim to achievement. I made it as an important person in the world. The emphasis is less on the 'it' that was made and rather more on the 'I'.

When we first wander around this exhibition the most powerful pull is in the direction of the second meaning of 'making it'. There are works here that are so spectacular that we feel they have 'made it' as art. These objects are generally riveting, they amaze and enchant. Wow – did you see what they did with someone's hair? A dress made from cassette tape? How did they DO that with just paper or wire? By the end we are asking ourselves if there is no end to our capacity to imagine and no limit to our ability to realise these concepts in material form. These creators clearly delight in their achievement in manufacturing the fantastic from the most unlikely and obdurate materials. Crocheting a chair, making sculpture from coat hangers. The exhibition seems to grant such objects the imprimatur of the Victoria and Albert Museum. They have 'made it', alongside the likes of Ron Arad and McQueen. In turn they allow the Victoria and Albert Museum to challenge the finest art galleries in showing us the most extraordinary and inspiring of creations.

The problem with this first encounter and its accompanying amazement and enchantment is that we can feel awed, but also excluded; only very special people can create such amazing artefacts – the artists. But when we look again we realise that actually many of the things we have seen are not so special. They include eco and wicker coffins that are more expressive of what we hope will be our modesty in the face of the environment. Other objects remind us of the mundane worlds of making, the walking sticks and samplers. There are the charming and self-effacing things made by peoples from all around the world, where the delight is not in genius but merely in the shaping of materials into artefacts that adorn or facilitate our life. Where an art exhibition may subsume craft to aesthetics, here it is the other way around, there is a domestication of art taking place here, a bringing down to recognisable labour. The work may be beautiful but it is used to create a medical intervention. Extraordinary skill lies behind the prosthetics that give back a working limb or an artificial eye or a prototype. There is fancy and aesthetics, but here in service to utility.

We might be tempted to describe these objects as magical, but one of the key points of the exhibition is that they are not. These are not tricks and illusions. In almost every case, we may have difficulty imagining how to make it, but we can see clearly what it is made from. The dress is revealed as having been woven from cassette tape, the portraits are three dimensional but still paper. Given the imagination and skill, such things are possible without magic or illusion. Merely knowing what can now be envisaged brings us closer to that other aim of the Museum of Manufactures: to educate. Today an education in the basics of production is needed more than ever. We have become extraordinarily distant from the sources of our own material culture. I used to teach a university class on basic technology, taking examples from South Asia. It was soon evident that students today could be entirely ignorant of how the very clothes that they are wearing are made from spinning and weaving, how a pot is thrown or metal is cast, but equally what plastics are made from, and the difference between growing rice and growing wheat. The more things we possess and consume the more the origins of those things are taken for granted. How is it not part of our most basic education, at primary school, to learn the fundamentals of how most things are made and from what? As this exhibition reveals, it is only when the juxtaposition or material is distinctly odd that we are shocked into an awareness of the underlying technology.

The core of this exhibition lies not in art but in craft, objects that relate not to the quick invention of conceptual art but the slow perfection of skill. The constant endeavour that allowed someone to become better and better at what they could do with materials. While the term art conjures the tortured bohemian, the critic, huge sums of money and even bigger

egos, craft returns us to something that in practice is often deeper, commonly requiring both collaboration with other people and collaboration also with machines. It encompasses both industrial labour but also things that can be made at home, as a form of relaxation from a day spent at work, embroidered jewellery, quilting and knitting in the living room, messy stuff in the shed. Some exhibits are unique but others speak to crafts of popular culture that wouldn't normally have 'made it' to the Victoria and Albert Museum as emblematic of art, yet are quite prominent in many high streets, such as nail art or fake food displays. Some objects have been made by grafting popular culture onto craft, as with hybrid Wedgewood and Cola.

It's not all fun; reborn babies may be poignant but pretty creepy. Nor should it be possible to stand in a field of objects, many of which are consumer goods and commodities, without the pricking of conscience. The green objects remind us that there does need to be an end to quantity - at least of those objects that are not ultimately sustainable from an environmental perspective. Every now and then we find ourselves in places such as Rwanda and Haiti. Suddenly we are thinking of a much wider world, including countries that are otherwise banished to mere 'Made in...' labels hidden in the clothes or ornaments we buy that protect us from views of exploitation and inure us to our own role and responsibility for a world in which the demand for cheaper and cheaper goods ends up somewhere as competition for lower and lower paid labour.

These concerns resonate with the core theme of craft because both are founded in the art of care. The care that we take in making something properly is cousin to the care we retain for other people and their labour and to a care and concern for our environment and its future. It is a common conversational trope to suggest that we live in a superficial and transient world. We don't at all. We live in a world that constantly tempts us to be superficial and transient because there is so much of it. So many things we could do and give attention to. But there is nothing to stop us making selections, narrowing our attention and selecting depth at the expense of breadth. Opting for patience and seeking skill. By a certain age most people you meet have found some little plot or computer screen from which to cultivate some depth to themselves. So that if you can be bothered to come with them to their allotment or their room (or perhaps now their YouTube or url) and gain their confidence they might shyly reveal and take pride in what they have created.

Much of my academic life has been an attempt to acknowledge that there can be skill and craft and production even in the midst of consumption. The word 'bespoke' attached to several of these exhibits links the personal in production with the personal in consumption. I would go further still and value the crafts of everyday life: being good at putting on makeup before going to work in the office, at spotting a promising football player so that you can impress your mates in the pub, assembling just the right combination of clothes from your wardrobe or planning an expedition which makes all the children are equally happy. An attitude that only celebrates the craftspeople that have 'made it' but fails to recognise the way all of us, every day, strive to do some things well, ignores the breadth as well as depth of skill and craft in modern life.

So this exhibition is actually itself a fine act of craftsmanship, conceptually as well as physically. It neither excludes art at one end nor industry at the other. It follows the Museum of Manufactures in camping out on the middle ground where you don't need to be an artist or to have a factory. All you need to do is to remind yourself that producing things is one of the

most effective means for the realisation of the person, for seeing one's own capacity in the evidence of the things we have ourselves created. We all make things all the time, we cook meals, we write essays, we decorate rooms, we craft playlists for dance parties on iphones, we may even sew or carve. Inspired by this exhibition, we think about what we could do with Lego or Swarovsky or through miniaturisation or unexpected juxtaposition. Maybe not a bamboo car, but I am suddenly wondering if I could do more with pasta than just eat it?