

The Socially Skilled Craftsman

What skills do craftsmen¹ at a textile studio in the 20th century think they need to be accomplished craftsmen? Results from seventeen interviews with female craftsmen at Handarbetets Vänner (Friends of Handicraft) in Stockholm, Sweden, show that the craftsmen prioritise their social skills over their skills in craft. This paper aims to present how the craftsmen define these social skills. The paper is part of the results of a postdoctoral-project conducted at Textiles Studies, Department of Art History, Uppsala University, Sweden.

Friends of Handicraft was initiated in Stockholm in 1874. The aims were, and still are, to preserve and develop the Swedish textile craft tradition and to create possibilities for women to make a living in textile craft by offering education and employment (Danielsson, 1991:92). Today, the establishment consists of a studio, a school and a gallery/shop. The craftsmen at the Friends of Handicrafts studio have always produced textiles of the highest standard. Textiles for public spaces, churches, and private customers are produced by craftsmen using the textile techniques of embroidery and weaving, in close collaboration with artists. Colour, material, and technique are chosen on the basis of creativity and experience, and are adapted to a specific design according to the artist's sketch and vision. It is important to state that the craftsmen never work as artists who make sketches within the studio, as they are educated within vocational craft education, not art school. The tradition within the studio is that the craftsmen have been either weavers or embroiders but that the two categories sometimes cooperated within commissions. Over the last ten to fifteen years the specialization in crafts has decreased since the craftsmen need to know both techniques. However knowledge in embroidery has been considered more important since commissions of tapestry have gone down in number and commissions performed by embroiders been sustained. This have led to an increasing competence in embroidery and a diminishing competence in weaving or a double competence in both techniques among the craftsmen.

Seventeen craftsmen, all women, have been interviewed in semi-structured interviews where the informants were able to affect the interview's structure and extent (Kvale, 1997). All the craftsmen, apart from the newly employed when the study was conducted, had worked at Friends of Handicraft at least ten years or more. The oldest craftsman was employed in 1948. Here, I am concerned with the years from 1948 to 2013. It is important to state that my principal interest in this study was the craftsmen's personal knowledge and unique experience.

¹ In this paper the word craftsman' and master' are used as gender-neutral title. All the craftsmen who serve as informants in this paper are women.

Working together

To *work together* is one of the essences of learning among masters, journeymen and apprentices. In this way of learning, it is central not to divide the learning from the use of what is learned. The learning takes place in the context where the learned is used in production and deeply affected by the social practice where it is performed. (Nielsen & Kvale, 2008:34)

The results are presented under the heading “Working together” since this is what constitutes the arena where, according to the craftsmen, the use of the social skills is essential. This arena has been divided in to subareas, here presented as subheadings, in an attempt to pinpoint how and when the craftsmen say they principally use their social skills.

In the process

To be able to learn throughout the work process the journeymen and apprentices need to adapt to the master’s interpretation of the sketch and way of conducting the craft. The master’s interpretation is crucial in the work since she makes samples initiating the collaboration with the artist. At the same time journeymen and apprentices cannot be too adaptable as they need to be active participants in the work. You must be a team player but at the same time be secure in your own ability to contribute to the process.

The craftsmen state that communication beyond just talking is important. One craftsman said:

We have to listen to each other. You almost become one person, because you have to think in same way.

The ability to adapt (and be adaptive) differs within a group: some are more egocentric than others. Despite these differences, the ability to know when to take a step back and observe, when to be an active listener or when to talk is what makes it possible to “almost become one person”.

To sit next to each other, working with the same product or with products in the same suite, can be both challenging and rewarding. The craftsmen say that this way of organizing the work expands their patience and consideration for each other. At the same time, this is one of the situations that makes the demand for social skills very important when you enter the work. You have to know when it is time for small talk and when it is time to analyse the results critically.

Movement

When you move your hand and lift the weft you can do this in slightly different ways. You can for example twist the weft more or less or lay the weft more loosely or firmly in the warp. Craftsmen can have individual methods when they practice their craft. This can be something they learned in their education or it can be a personal interpretation of something they have seen in their work life. When you work together, the result must look the same independent of which craftsman has been working in the production. It is

important to notice that when the craftsmen make, for instance, a tapestry or a large-scale embroidery they make different parts of the textile, but this fact can under no circumstances become visual.

This means that the craftsmen may have to adjust their movements (or at least the outcomes of movements) to those of their colleagues and especially of the master. The craftsmen consider the ability to communicate and observe at the same time as you perform your craft central when it comes to the ability to change and adopt an individual's movements. You have to observe, reflect, adjust movements and this procedure must be ongoing during the work. Schön calls this "reflection in action" (1995). In the work of the craftsmen at Friends of Handicraft, the reflection in action affects the outcome of the craftsmen's movement. The work (as well as the result) is thereby a result of what Richard Sennet calls the "use of the triad of the "intelligent hand" – coordination of hand, eye, and brain" (2008:174).

Colour

The ability to see differences and nuances in colours is a skill that the craftsmen take for granted: this skill is something you have when you get employed. In addition to this, the skill grows as the ability to see, interpret and mix colours increases when the craftsmen work with new commissions. In this progress, social skills are important since the craftsmen need to co-operate both with each other and with artists. One craftsman described her memories of this process from her time as an apprentice:

She mixed colours, and I looked at how she was doing this. When she looked at the sketch and mixed the yarn my feeling was clear. That is not the way I see the colour! I had to adapt to the master's way of seeing.

To be able to see colour in the same way as someone else, or at least act as if you see colour in the same way, the social interactions and your empathic abilities must be at a high level. You have to understand when to mix an orange thread with a turquoise thread despite the fact that there is no orange colour in the sketch. You can't ask each other every time a thread is picked – someone has to adapt or learn to co-operate so that different ways of seeing colour aren't noticed in the end result.

The social skill of communication is also crucial when it comes to ordering yarn or fabric from the craftsman who is in charge of dyeing. In this communication nuances must be verbalised. What a more blue or green black means in a wool or linen thread must be carefully and precisely defined in words with the help of samples. Both the person who needs the yarn or fabric and the person who is responsible for dyeing has to understand each other's ways of communicating subtle descriptions of colour – this takes awareness and an open mind.

Artist - Craftsman

None of the craftsmen at Friends of Handicraft are textile artists' they never do sketches for textiles produced within the studio. Every commission therefore is a process where the craftsmen interpret an artist's sketch and visions. When the craftsmen talk about this work

they emphasise a craftsman's ability to be sensitive and responsive. This can be seen in a quotation from one of the weavers:

I try to listen to what this person (artist) finds important. I don't think I ask questions, I listen to how they talk and how they look at the sketch. Then I try to look at the sketch with their eyes.

This means that the craftsman must have the ability to see, listen and use new impressions together with their own experience and knowledge – all in the collaboration with the artist. In this way, working with artists helps the craftsmen develop deeper knowledge.

One example of a commission where these social skills were very important is the sculpture "Vildhundens hjärta" by Olle Bonnièr. The artist Bonnièr brought a brief sketch and a model of Styrofoam to the studio when he met the craftsmen. The highly socially skilled master and her colleagues encouraged, made suggestions, showed materials and made samples while the artist told them about his experience of being rescued by a wild dog when he was a child. Bonnièr's verbal vision and expressed feelings added information to the sketch and model, which the craftsmen then transformed into a sculpture.

Conclusions

Social skills are, in science and everyday life, defined primarily as the ability to cooperate, verbal communication and empathic ability. The skills are said to be "required for successful social interaction" (oxforddictionaries.com).

When the craftsmen at Friends of Handicraft describe the social skills they think are necessary in their line of work, they use these skills within the process of several individuals working together. The social skills are used in the interpretation of a sketch, the transformation from paper to textile. The artist's and the craftsmen's respective creative processes are thereby an arena where the skills are used. Creativity, textile material and textile techniques, are at the same time, the tools and the outcome where the social skills are used and defined as important.

When you learn a craft within a studio you are a part of a community of practice (Wenger 1998). There is a way of doing things within the studio that has developed over the years. At Friends of Handicraft, some parts of how the craft is conducted depend on the traditions and aims of the establishment handed down since 1874, others are connected to changes implemented by the artistic leader Edna Martin during the years 1951 - 1977. These long traditions don't mean that every craftsman needs to act, or be the same. However, there is what can be seen as a variety of action patterns you have to fit in to. The social skills of *ability to cooperate, verbal communication and empathic ability* help the craftsmen to adjust and fit in to these patterns and thereby makes it possible to work at Friends of Handicrafts studio.

The social skills are important for the employer, and the lack of prioritising the *ability to cooperate* and *empathic ability* has over the years led to dismissal but more often to the lack of offers of employment from the beginning. Since the craftsmen in the studio are "hand-

picked” by those working as teachers in the establishment’s own school, the social skills are noticed and crucial for offers of employment. Sometimes the employed craftsmen choose to leave Friends of Handicraft – according to the result of my interviews a lack of the social skills needed in the work was sometimes the reason.

I see, if not a problem, at least something interesting in the fact that a person has to adjust aspects of their personality while developing as a craftsman. You have to develop and grow in the process of creating a textile together with colleagues (masters, journeymen and apprentices) who have slightly different ways of conducting the craft – all within the community of practice. These are lifelong commitments for the craftsmen since they work under principles that demand constant development in the craft. A way of securing this balance of adjustment and development (with the help of social skills) is done by working according to what David Pye (1995) calls *workmanship of risk* and *workmanship of certainty*. This means that a constant struggle for progress to make sure that stagnation does occur is what constitutes the work within the studio at Friends of Handicraft.

Sources

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