

Are We Going To Lose Traditional Craftsmanship?

By Bob Garay

As a retired shop teacher of thirty years I have seen the trend happening the entire time I taught. In fact when I started my teaching career a fellow shop teacher said to me "Why would you come into this profession? We will be closing the shops soon." He was right, and throughout my thirty years of teaching they steadily closed every shop in our school district. This matched the trend across New Jersey and the nation. Administrators and Boards of Education focused on college prep and teaching to the test, and young students were not learning traditional handiwork at home. At the same time our nations consumers on the whole does not respect quality handiwork and spend their purchasing power on cheap imports. This has caused the United States to lose its manufacturing, and any workers who do struggle to compete have to compromise with mass production practices over quality hand work.

Yet as a dealer selling quality vintage tools, I do recognize a resurgence of interest in traditional handwork. Currently my sales have focused on selling quality vintage user tools in ready to use condition. I have sold thousands of tools to men and woman who want to use the tools in their pursuit of hands on woodworking and or metalworking. A common scenario is the professional worker who spends the majority of his day in an office and when he gets home he just wants to unwind in his basement shop. Of course using hand tools to build a piece of furniture for his family is a plus, and traditional practices with hand tools is safer, is not noisy and causes little dust. It is the perfect way to spend an evening especially when you consider the physical activity coupled with the minds on activity. Much better than sitting in front of a television all evening.

Two of the stimuli of this resurgence are Roy Underhill and Chris Schwarz. Roy is well known to most CRAFTS members for his Woodwrights Workshop PBS series. He currently is popular as ever and has a series of "Shop Class" episodes that can be seen thru the internet. Chris Schwarz is past editor of Popular Woodworking and currently is publisher at Lost Art Press. His book; *The Anarchist's Tool Chest*, is a must read for all CRAFTS members. It explains the

necessary hand tools for traditional woodworking practices. Chris stresses the usability of quality vintage hand tools. Below is a sampling of his thoughts from this book about how we need to pick up the charge of preserving traditional woodcrafts. It has guided my current thinking about the importance of CRAFTS and the work we do.

Following are excerpts from various pages in *The Anarchist's Tool Chest*, by Chris Schwarz;

***I think it is a bold** but fair statement to say that the craft of woodworking was cut down by the aftermath of World War II. The global reconstruction in Europe and the mass mechanization required to do it quickly girdled the bole of the woodworking craft.*

Chisels were put away. Moulding planes were burned. Saws were allowed to rust.

To be sure, hand woodworking had been in decline (especially in the Americas) since the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. But while Americans embraced industry, the English and the Europeans kept handcraft alive with the help of the medieval guild system. Before World War II, there were still lots of quality hand tools being made and used in shops. Even the infill plane maker Norris was hanging on until the war.

Up until 1945, hand tools were still the norm in the home. Power tools were too expensive

and were reserved for industry. Heck, just look at Stanley's production history to see the whole thing play out. Up until the war, Stanley was still making a full range of high-quality planes and chisels. After the war things took a nose dive in New Britain, Conn. Today tool collectors draw a line between tools made before World War II and those made after.

..... We have become a culture that is obsessed with the price more than any other attribute of the things we buy. It doesn't matter if the item is ugly, poorly made or constructed of materials that cannot be recycled. All that matters is if the price is low enough.

Because the price of our household objects has hit rock bottom, if an item breaks or starts to look dated, we can throw it away and buy something else. For the first time in human history, manufactured furniture is shockingly inexpensive.



Two guys leading today's renaissance in traditional woodworking, left-Roy Underhill & right-Chris Schwarz.

So it's no wonder that artisans are exiting the craft. It's difficult to compete against furniture that costs less than what you pay for your raw materials.

.....What I care about is the craft of woodworking, which is closer to extinction now than at any other time in the history of the human race. How do we save it?



Chris Schwarz teaching a class using traditional woodworking techniques.

I'm so glad you asked.

It's our duty as amateurs to pick up the mantle of the craft of woodworking from the professionals, who have been carrying this heavy burden for us for generation after generation. It is our turn to preserve the design, joinery and finishing skills that are now being transferred to CNC machinery.

How can we do this? Part of this is done by preserving the written woodworking knowledge about how to build stuff without computers or automation.

But those two tasks above are the easy things to do. The hard part is the important part. We have to acquire, store and redistribute the actual hand skills. But you can't deposit those into a book, a video or computer.

There is only one place that hard-won hand skills can be stored then accessed by future generations: that is in your hands and in your heart.

By absorbing and practicing these skills we can ensure they will not be lost – as long as we are willing to teach them freely to younger woodworkers. For most of human history, the important stuff about working wood was never written down or shared outside a tight-knit group of professionals. Most of their knowledge is gone. Read George Sturt's "The Wheelwright's Shop" for a first-hand example of this. I ask you to share what you know with anyone who will listen. Write a book. Start a blog.

But those tasks- difficult as they are – are not all I am asking of you.

If you honestly want to preserve the craft as more than an academic curiosity – perhaps to lay the groundwork for a craft revival, then try this: Consider living more like an 18th – century artisan and less like a 21st-century mega-consumer. This path isn't chock-full of fun. I know because I'm on it. During the last decade, my priorities have shifted to the point where now I:

Buy things that are well-made by skilled people who sell them for a fair price

Decline to purchase cheap goods that are designed to be discarded.

Whenever possible, make exactly what I need, instead of buying something that will suffice for now.

For me, this behavior has resulted in my questioning the institutions that encourage wasteful consumption, particularly large corporations and the governments in service to them. These institutions are the opposite of individual enterprise, and I worry about the way they work because I think they endanger our craft.

I call this practical skepticism, but its more proper name is "anarchism." So be it.



Herb Kean spends many Saturday mornings teaching Brian, his neighbor, woodworking. Here they are working on a jewelry box for his mother's birthday gift.