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Contemporary Craft and the Commodification of National Identity in 1970s Scotland– What can be learned from Cultural Policy?

The aim of this research paper is to investigate the British craft revival of the 1970s, focusing specifically on Scotland, and to examine aspects of the production and consumption of contemporary Scottish craft at this time. It will analyse the impact of cultural policy on the identity and perceived cultural value of the craft object in Scotland, and consider the relationship between craft and the construction of national identity. As a case study, this research will provide insight into how cultural policy and strategy can influence the course of craft production and consumption, and provide lessons which may be applicable to a twenty-first century context.

Scotland benefits from a long and rich cultural heritage, which is readily associated with its material culture. For Scotland, this heritage has, in the latter half of the twentieth century, provided opportunities for the craft practitioner, in satisfying the demand for objects representing notions of 'Scottishness'. The production of such objects, ranging from indigenous folk art to contemporary studio craft, has been, and continues to be, actively supported and promoted by cultural agencies because of its importance to the Scottish economy and cultural identity.

Indigenous Scottish craft, and its associated iconography in particular, have been adopted in Scotland since the eighteenth century as a means of promoting Scottish national identity at home and abroad. However this research will show that the use of traditional iconography is curiously at odds with Scotland's rise as a modern industrial nation in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the concurrent demise of its more traditional rural economies and communities, and the eventual move towards devolution after the 1970s (McCrone 1995). By exploring notions of national identity and heritage, often associated with indigenous Scottish craft objects and lifestyles, this research will consider whether a cultural legacy can be successfully reconciled in contemporary craft practice, both commercially and aesthetically. Does a strong national identity or material culture 'brand' (McCrone 1995) associated with heritage and tradition, impede creative autonomy in contemporary craft practice or provide opportunity?

This research begins by focusing on Scottish craft practice in the 1970s, and will look at the impact of cultural policy on the production and consumption of the contemporary craft object in Scotland through several case studies. Craft historians acknowledge the 1970s as a general period of revival and reinvention of craft practice in Britain (Harrod 1999; Adamson 2007). This is largely evidenced by the creation of new craft funding bodies, such as the Crafts Advisory Committee (CAC), founded in 1971 (now the Crafts Council), which supported the crafts nationally and promoted the concerns of the craftsman. One of the CAC's remits was to establish a greater position of prominence for the crafts, and to specifically champion the 'artist craftsman'. To achieve this goal, an effort was made to give the crafts a distinctly contemporary identity, by employing terminology which was more associated with modernity and artistry, than history and tradition. I will argue that the terminology used by the CAC to reposition the crafts and gain the attraction of policy makers was significant, both then and now, in shaping the identity and outcomes of craft production and consumption.

Craft is a slippery, multivalent term, as acknowledged by the design historian Paul Greenhalgh (Greenhalgh 2002: 1), and its role in society and status is of direct concern to this paper. Although 'making' and artisanship have a long history (Lucie-Smith 1981; Greenhalgh 1997), it has been posited that the concept of craft is a relatively recent phenomenon, the product of the industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries which forced a reinterpretation of divisions between art and manufacture (Macdonald 2005). Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1960) provides us with a theoretical framework for understanding changes which were significant to society through the analysis of specific key words. Williams' examination of 'art' as a key word is of particular relevance to this study. He traces the separation of skill, or craft, from art as a result of mechanised production, and consequently, the emergence of art's association with concepts such as 'creativity' and 'imagination'. Craft had come to describe a different kind of activity, now undertaken not by an artist but an *artisan*. This physical and intellectual separation of activity resulted in a decline in status for craft, which informed not only how makers perceived themselves, but also how craft was perceived by a consuming public (Williams 1960). This research argues that central to this idea, is the relationship between terminology and cultural policy, which is critical in moulding the identity and outcomes of craft practice. Put in simple terms, with art being perceived as being of higher status, it can be argued that it concurrently enjoyed the benefits of attracting greater funding and exposure. For this reason, associating craft with art was seen by some as expedient, and in the 1970s particularly, with the formation of the Crafts Advisory Committee, the notion of the 'artist as craftsman' was crucial in its attempts to raise the status craft. This was evidenced by Lord Eccles, the Paymaster General (a treasury post with responsibility for the arts), who when announcing the formation of the CAC in 1971, referred specifically to the '*artist craftsman*' in his address to the House of Lords (Harrod 1999: 369).

Until recently there has been a paucity of literature on the history of crafts in Britain generally, and Tanya Harrod's expansive volume, *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century* (1999), does little to address the Scottish context as a separate concern. When examining recent craft histories it is therefore easy to assume that Britain as a whole followed a more or less uniform trajectory in the 1970s, in terms of policy and ideology, however this paper argues that this was not the case. Although a craft revival was indeed experienced across Britain in the 1970s, as in other parts of the western world (Alfoldy 2005), a difference in ideology adopted by cultural agencies led to very differing outcomes for the crafts between England and Wales, and Scotland (Harrod 1999: 370; Wood 1996: 29). These differences can be largely attributed to disparate funding structures of the time. The CAC, which was responsible for the majority of funding of the crafts in England and Wales, received its support from the Arts Branch of the Department of Education and Science, whereas backing for Scottish craft came from the Department of Trade and Industry. (Crafts Advisory Committee 1977: 1). While the CAC actively promoted the 'craftsperson as artist' in England and Wales, Scottish funding enterprises were more concerned with positioning craft as 'small business activity' (Peach 2007). This seemed only natural, as Victor Margrie, then secretary to the CAC, reported:

I would suggest that the greatest difference between Scotland and our own operation, is that Scotland places greater emphasis on employment and craft industries rather than on the individual artist-craftsman and this is quite a natural thing for them to do considering that crafts play a very important part in Scotland's economy (Macleod 1975).

This difference in terminology, or keywords, to reference Raymond Williams, was crucial to craft's image at this time. The CAC's connection with the Arts Branch, it can be argued, encouraged them to establish a new image for the crafts, which was much closer to fine art practice than to design, and provides an exemplar of how the targeted support of particular forms of craft production by cultural agencies can ultimately influence how it is represented culturally (Alfoldy 2005).

An example of this can be seen in one of the CAC's first initiatives in 1973: a publication titled *Crafts*, which is still in circulation today. *Crafts'* agenda was to promote the contemporary and artistic aspects of craft, and directly mirrored the CAC's ideology at this time. As stated in their review, *The Work of the Crafts Advisory Committee 1974-77*:

Whilst tradition and the sense of continuity have a part to play, they should not be allowed to take precedence over individual creativity, nor should they divert the artist craftsman from making a response to the modern world. (p.2)

Crafts magazine was not particularly interested in craft history, as can be seen by the front cover of its first issue, which featured a contemporary textile hanging by the artist Judith Lewis [fig 1]. As Tanya Harrod writes, *Crafts* was keen to celebrate the newness of the 'new' crafts. (Harrod 1997: 387)

Scotland had its own craft magazine at this time, titled *Craftwork Scotland's Magazine for the Crafts*. It was launched in 1972 and preceded *Crafts* by one year. Whether we can read anything into the fact that Scotland was first to have its own publication promoting the crafts is debatable, but it is significant that Scotland's first craft magazine was funded not by the CAC but by a collection of business enterprise organisations, including the Scottish Craft Centre (SCC), the Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB) and the Small Industries Council for Rural Areas of Scotland (SICRAS). This gave the magazine a very different flavour to *Crafts*, one which was more conservative and pragmatic in appearance and approach. The cover of its first edition was a subtle fusion of tradition and restrained modernity; its contents concerned with the production of craft and its sustainability in rural economies [fig 2]. Of course it is difficult to draw direct comparisons between *Craftwork* and *Crafts*. *Craftwork* enjoyed less funding than *Crafts*, and was therefore more modest in scope and tenure. It was also only in circulation for 16 years, with just over a thousand readers at the time of its demise in 1988. In contrast, *Crafts'* readership at the same time was over thirteen thousand (British Rate and Service Index 1989). However what is significant about *Craftwork* as an historical document is that it evidences the tensions experienced in Scotland between the desire to engage with contemporary craft production being championed by *Crafts*, and the demand for more hackneyed interpretations of 'Scottishness' evident in commercial Scottish craft products at the time. These debates can be seen in the spirited editorials written by *Craftwork's* editor, Bill Williams, and its active 'Letters to the Editor' section which featured contributions from makers and craft shop owners.

Craft objects in the 1970s were considered an important part of Scotland's exchange economy. In a 1969 report, the HIBD considered commercial craft production in Scotland to consist of indigenous craft based on traditional forms or adaptations thereof (1). However these traditional forms, which are often recognisable symbols of Scottish identity, including thistles, tartan and general evocations of the Highlands, bear little evidence to the fact that Scotland was an industrial pioneer whose population at the time was based largely in and around its urbanised lowland areas. The Scottish historian T.M. Devine writes of this curious paradox, explaining that the adoption of traditional Highland symbols enabled Scotland to negotiate its rapid transition to modernity, by unifying the Highlands and Lowlands in one cohesive national identity that could be universally recognised (Devine 1999: 231). The adoption of a romanticised iconography to construct a visual form of national identity is not unique to Scotland, as Eric Hobsbawm argues in *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 12). Indeed the uncomfortable transition from rural to post-industrial society can often be facilitated by collectively embracing a nostalgic image of the past. Certainly in Scotland's case, with the rise of the Scottish National Party in the 1970s, and the move towards devolution, symbols such as the thistle were uniformly adopted and continue to be so.

The need for an external face for Scotland's crafts was also recognised in the 1970s, and funding organisations such as the Highlands and Islands Development Board led to the creation of the Highlands and Islands Craft Display Centre in Inverness (1972). This organisation had the task of promoting and selling Scottish handmade products, including kilts, knitwear, ceramics and Highland artefacts, largely directed at tourists [fig 3]. Tourism was, and continues to be, an important economic driver for Scotland, and had begun to gain momentum in the 1970s. With its origins in the eighteenth century, Scottish tourism grew steadily due to improvements in transportation and access, and led to the demand for objects that would complement the tourist experience (Durie 2003; Gold and Gold 1995). It is well-documented that the visiting public were attracted by the romantic notion of Highlandism, promulgated initially through literary confections such as John Macpherson's Ossian translations (1760) and later Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels (1814). Queen Victoria's purchase of Balmoral (1848), and the works of painter Edwin Landseer, such as *Monarch of the Glen* (1851), further added to the myth. These idealised visions of a Highland wilderness and its associated traditions resulted in a construction of heritage that can be directly linked to the development of a mythologised cultural nationalism, as explored by McCrone et al. in *Scotland the Brand* (1995). It also had a significant impact on the production and consumption of crafts. Sales of Highland craft products which embodied this myth (not including garments such as Shetland knitwear and Harris Tweed) increased ten-fold to £3.5 million between the late 1960s and mid 70s (*Scottish Crafts Now* 1980: 76). Satisfying the demand of tourists through the production of Scottish craft artefacts as souvenirs was seen by cultural agencies, such as HIBD and SICRAS, who supported the crafts, as means of sustaining rural communities, and provided a real opportunity for the craft practitioner, as the Chief Executive of the Scottish Tourist Board confirmed in 1975:

There is a great potential for people who can express the artistic character of a country. Craft made articles are very important to tourists who make it possible and profitable for many craftsmen to exist in remote parts of the country (Lyon 1975).

However concerns and frustrations abounded, not only from the perspective of the craft consumer, but also the producer. The Highlands and Islands Industrial Board, whose remit was to support the interests of local businesses, produced a survey of craft workers in 1969, which confirmed that although there was a demand for cultural artefacts in the form of souvenirs, visitors were often disappointed by the selection and quality of objects available. A retailers survey published in 1974, also expressed concern about the consumers' preference for cheaper mass-produced goods, rather than higher-priced local products. Scottish craftspeople, many having been trained in Scotland's art schools, found a voice through the editorial pages of *Craftwork* magazine, and expressed anger about the demand for cheap objects which represented a stereotypical view of Scottishness: 'And of course the tartan thistles sell (God how they sell!) But where's the real thing – where's true craft?' (Williams 1972).

Not only were the makers frustrated by the objects purporting to be Scottish, those who wished to adopt a more contemporary aesthetic were often thwarted by a lack of demand for such products from tourists.

The quest for what might be described as 'true craft' was hotly debated at this time and attempts to regulate the quality of craft objects being produced for the tourist market were made by introducing a series of Scottish souvenir competitions which were held between 1970 and 1980. In addition, the HIBD launched a 'Craftmade' labelling scheme in 1971, which sought to differentiate quality craft products that were made in Scotland from mass-produced souvenirs. Their advertisement from 1973 shows the kind of artefacts being designated as 'worthy' of the Craftmade label by the HIBD and feature a range of items including traditional Fair Isle knits, an Orkney chair, as well as tableware

and jewellery in contemporary Celtic designs [fig 3]. But as a maker visiting an annual craft trade fair sponsored by the HIBD and SICRAs pointed out:

The majority of hand-made goods at the Trade Fair were neither well made, nor showed much imagination. I know there are better craftsmen in Scotland ... It is only by seeing well made goods that the public will learn to be more discriminating. As for the mass produced souvenirs, I simply don't know what they were doing at a 'craft fair' (Youseman 1973).

Although the HIBD saw the crafts as a means of sustaining rural economies, they were very aware of the problems associated with promoting the crafts as a commodity to be consumed by tourists. This relationship was one which would continue to pose problems for makers as they attempted to negotiate the tricky path of satisfying the demands of tourists and maintaining creative autonomy:

...it's a case of educating the general public so they will want more than the hackneyed cairngorm, thistle or Mary Queen of Scots heart. Scotland has a major disadvantage compared to other European countries in so far as it has a strong tradition. The tourist expects to see these old clichés, which is bound to restrict the designer and inhibit his creative field (*Ian Clarkson – Man of Silver 1978*).

The 1970s offer an insight into a critical period in craft history, which experienced a revival in interest and support for the crafts nationally, but witnessed differing ideological approaches across the country. The CAC in England and Wales embraced a fine-arts based policy, which encouraged the production of contemporary, one-off studio pieces, whereas in Scotland the emphasis was on craft as a small-business activity, promoting the production of objects destined largely for the tourist market. The support of cultural agencies, in this case the Highlands and Islands Industrial Board, the Small Industries for Rural Areas of Scotland, as well as the Scottish Craft Centre, was crucial in influencing the trajectory of the production and consumption of crafts, based on the economic role the crafts were designated to play. As stated bluntly in the HIBD's Proposal for Development in 1974:

In recognizing the value of this work in social and aesthetic terms, we should not be misled into believing that uniqueness alone necessarily qualifies the object as a viable commodity. Philosophical and personal issues apart, the only real answer to the question – *what is the purpose of a designer craftsman's activity* – must be – *to make objects that sell* (Pirnie 1974: 3).

Despite the best efforts of cultural agencies, through the creation of the 'Craftmade' label and an effort to regulate the quality of souvenir production, it can be argued that the emphasis on the commodification of Scottish craft products was viewed as restrictive and inhibiting to the creative autonomy of Scottish craft makers, as was voiced by one maker in *Craftwork* magazine:

The idea of making worthless souvenirs is patronizing and mercenary. Let our craftsmen make beautiful useful articles and let our visitors remember us for their quality.... (Hird 1975: 6).

So what contemporary parallels can be drawn from this research? Recognised globally for its excellence, Scottish craft currently faces particular challenges in terms of opportunities for development and public access. A recent report by the Scottish Arts Council ('Review of Strategies and Challenges for the Way Ahead' 2010: 2-7), now Creative Scotland, identifies that craft continues to be of strategic importance to Scotland's culture and economy, however cautions that contemporary Scottish craft currently suffers from a detrimental lack of public profile. Dedicated facilities and funding for craftspeople are on the decline and specialist craft courses in art colleges are closing

down (Harrod 2009). Creative Scotland has identified the need for a more cohesive image for the crafts as well as a more focused retail system. The desire to showcase contemporary craft is seen as a priority, as is the need for a national centre for crafts. History shows that these are familiar concerns. Recent initiatives provide a hopeful outlook for the crafts in Scotland. Craftscotland, a registered charity funded by Creative Scotland, purports to be the world's first audience development agency for craft:

We work to unite, inspire and champion Scottish craft. We are a team of creative thinkers, marketers and champions of Scottish craft, placing ourselves at the front of a global craft revolution (<http://www.craftscotland.org/About-Us.htm> - accessed 30 august 2011).

With creative initiatives such as 'the C word', a marketing campaign promoting contemporary Scottish craft, and the launch of a new website and brand later this year, Craftscotland's aim is to set the cultural context for craft in Scotland. Certainly when examining the innovative and contemporary work of the twenty five makers who will represent Scottish craft at the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show in November 2011 (<http://pmacraftshow.org/>), it is difficult to detect a reliance on any Scottish cultural stereotypes. Instead you will see a more gentle nod to Highlandism and 'the myth', through subtle references to the Scottish landscape, the use of natural materials, references to ancient stories and customs, and workmanship rooted in traditional techniques. However it was also interesting to note at a recent Craftscotland conference, titled *Craft Connected* (<http://craftscotland.org/About%20craftscotland/craftconnected>) that contemporary makers were not ashamed to rely on Scottish tropes to generate interest. James Donald, a weaver and one the makers who will be represented at the Craftscotland launch in America, said that he always wears his kilt when promoting his work abroad, and Lauren Currie, director of the Scottish service design consultancy Snook (<http://wearesnook.com/snook/>), said that she is happy to wear her tartan tights when promoting Scottish design.

This paper began by asking whether a strong national identity or material culture 'brand' associated with heritage and tradition, impedes creative autonomy in contemporary craft practice or provides opportunity. It has shown that makers continue to negotiate between contemporary and traditional interpretations of craft as well as negotiate the positive and negative associations of 'Scottishness' when promoting a national 'brand'. Although designers today continue to make reference to Scottish heritage when promoting their products, cultural agencies such as Craftscotland, specifically promote a contemporary identity for Scottish craft, and do not feel the need to revert to stereotypes. What this investigation has shown is that concerns about the future viability and profile of craft are not new, and that the issues being confronted in the 1970s, a time of revival and vibrancy of the crafts nationally, are still current. The relationship between cultural policy and strategy evidenced in the 1970s continues to have an impact upon craft practice, in terms of its production and consumption, and provides lessons future craft policy and direction.

NOTES:

(1) A survey of craftworkers undertaken by the HIDB in 1969 reported twenty broad types of craft being commercially undertaken in Scotland which included: boat building, carving and woodturning, costume figures and toymaking, crook and stick making, deerskin, sealskin and sheepskin processing, specialist furniture making, hornwork, jewellery, leatherwork and saddlery, marquetry and fine woodwork, model making, painting drawing and sketching, pottery, shellcraft and pebblework, silkscreen, printing and batik work, silverwork, copperwork and pewterwork, textiles (knitting and weaving) wrought ironwork and farriery. *Report Following a Survey of Craftworkers in Shetland, Orkney, Caithness, Sutherland, Rosshire, Invernesshire, Argyll* (1969) Highlands and Islands Development Board, Industrial Division, May: 2.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FIG 1. Cover, *Crafts*, no. 1 March 1973. Photographer: Rob Matheson, Artist: Judith Lewis.



FIG 2. Cover, *Craftwork – Scotland's Craft Magazine*, no. 1 summer 1972. Rams head fire poker by John MacDonald.

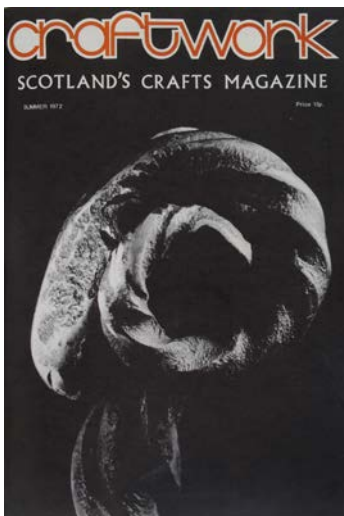


FIG 3. Craftmade Advertisement, *Craftwork – Scotland's Craft Magazine*, no 6 Winter 1973-4: 27.

Memories are made of this.

craftmade

The
Mark
of the
Highlands & Islands
of Scotland

When you're buying gifts,
look for the CRAFTMADE ticket.
It's the Mark of the Highlands and Islands
and ensures that what you buy
has indeed been produced in the Highlands.