

*Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century*

Edited by Janice Helland, Beverley Lemire and Alena Buis Ashgate, February 2014;  
245pp. 46 b&w illustrations; hardback £60.00 ISBN: 978-1-4094-6207-1

Through a series of colonial, Canadian, North American and British case studies, this volume explores the material and conceptual relationships between craft, place and community. Published as part of the Ashgate series 'Histories of Material Culture and Collecting, 1700-1950', *Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century* materialised from a conference held at the University of Alberta in 2011. The Editors' Introduction emphasizes the multi-disciplinary nature of this study of craft production, objects and environments and its common intellectual thread: 'the material culture of craft and its cultural and social disposition within societies.'

Exploring diverse cultures and societies, the chapters are not presented in chronological order but are linked instead by themes and relationships. Three main subjects emerge from the following ten essays: re-evaluations of the material culture created by Indigenous peoples (de Stecher; McCarthy; Whitelaw; Wintle); recoveries of the role played by women in the circulation, preservation and/or production of craft (Buis; Whitelaw; Helland; Richmond); and, re-imaginings of places built by and for craft modes of production (Cooke; Crowther; Myzelev). Placing object study at its centre, this collection of essays 'addresses the past and present of craft production, use and meaning within a range of community settings' and it is this overarching theme of community that is highlighted in Edward S. Cooke's opening essay on the politics of modern globalized craft. Here, Cooke historicizes and theorizes the concept of 'the village' as a romanticized location of craftwork in order to offer 'a longer view of modern craft marketing' (12). Focussing upon 'village crafts' and 'rural industries', his essay discusses many examples: the constructed Indian and Japanese 'living villages' displayed at nineteenth century exhibitions; the British and American agencies involved in promoting and preserving Anglo-craft after the Great War; and British imperial policies

surrounding the teaching of craft traditions in India and West Africa. Charting historical discourses about the 'village' which shift from 'aestheticized entertainment' towards economic policies and social control, Cooke's essay offers a nuanced discussion of 'the potentially positive *and* sinister aspects of globalized craft.' These positive aspects are explored in Anne de Stecher's essay which examines the distinctive embroidered moose-hair souvenir crafts produced by the Wendat (Huron) people of Quebec, a region which became a 'contact zone' between the women of Indigenous communities and French settlers. Noting the ceremonial and symbolic role these art-craft objects played in establishing diplomatic and trading alliances with both the French, and later British, colonizers from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, de Stecher considers the gendered production of Wendat crafts during the nineteenth century and situates this form of souvenir object within the context of the community's artistic, commercial and diplomatic traditions. The following essay also considers objects produced by Indigenous craftspeople. Conal McCarthy examines the rising status of Māori craft objects and the use of material culture by Māori politicians 'as a means uplifting Māori pride and declaring their presence' within the Dominion of New Zealand. Linking these developments to the British Arts & Crafts Movement, McCarthy examines the importance of the School of Māori Arts and Crafts (f. 1926); the construction, decoration and ceremonial opening of '*whare rūnanga*' (meeting houses); and, argues that the public exhibition of Māori arts and crafts was 'one of the first genuinely independent attempts by indigenous people to represent themselves in a museum'. The material culture of Indigenous peoples is returned to in later chapters, but placed before essays on Inuit Art and Great Andamanese body adornments, Alena Buis' chapter recovers the work of Louise du Pont Crowninshield, an American philanthropist and collector who was involved with the preservation and presentation of 'The Old Dutch House'; an historic 'Colonial Dutch' building in Delaware from the late 1930s. Drawing on Barthel's notion of 'staged symbolic communities' (1996) and Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' (1991), Buis considers the 'gendered communities formed through Colonial Revival collections' and the ways in which they contributed to America's founding mythologies.

Offering an interesting gender-based comparison with Crowninshield's brother, Henry Francis Du Pont and his collection at Winterthur, this chapter also considers the professionalization of the historic house museum; a process in which 'accredited men' replaced amateur/volunteer women. Anne Whitelaw's essay also considers the role of women in a chapter that nominally returns to the theme of Indigenous material culture. Focussing upon the circulation of Inuit Art in Canada by communities of women, this chapter charts the development, retail and formal collecting of 'Arctic Art', the soapstone carvings and prints made by Inuit craftspeople, which became popular in the 1950s. Here, too, the emphasis is on the role of the women who worked as volunteers in Canada's Art Galleries and Museums, rather than the Indigenous makers and/or the objects they produced as commodities sold initially to improve their economic conditions. Whitelaw demonstrates the importance of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild (CHG); the retail of Inuit craft through Museum Gift Shops; and, the consumption of 'native art objects' by women in 'establishing the aesthetic legitimacy of Inuit Art' which is now a central element of Canadian Art History and firmly established within permanent collections. Revisiting material previously published in her excellent book (2007), Janice Helland also considers women and craft retail, offering a re-focussed discussion of Alice Hart's Donegal Industries Fund (f. 1883) as an historical Fair Trade network. Aiming to open up 'alternative ways of discussing the objects, the spaces of display and the viewing and consuming audiences' (130), Helland's chapter succeeds in suggesting a new way of thinking about philanthropic projects organized by women. Her discussion of the simulated Irish villages at London's Irish Exhibition (1888) and the Chicago World's Fair (1893) provides a far more positive assessment of 'communities of displacement' than Claire Wintle's tragic account of British colonial rule in the Andaman Islands of India. Detained in the 'homes', residential institutions in the British settlement, and today almost extinct as an ethnic group, the treatment of the Great Andamanese people has been described as a form of 'ethnocide' (Venkateswar, 2004). However, focussing on the manufacture and trade of pandanus-leaf belts, a form of traditional body adornment made by Great Andamanese women, Wintle, whose earlier article in the *Journal of*

*Museum Ethnography* (20: 2008) and her more recent book (2013) offer new perspectives on the material culture of the Andaman Islands, re-assesses these objects made for export as 'evidence of community strength and counter-hegemonic agency within wider colonial and post-colonial frameworks': ideas explored in different contexts in the earlier chapters by de Stecher and McCarthy. The craft objects produced by another community of marginalized women are considered by Vivienne Richmond, whose chapter on the Girls' Friendly Society Central Needlework Dépôt (1899-1947) examines the history of this unique London-based all-female employment scheme for women with disabilities. Sharing Helland's concern with philanthropy and stressing the GFS's connections with the crafts revival (particularly the HAIA) and the social purity movements of the late-nineteenth century, Richmond uses archival materials, census records and studies of women and disability (Schweik 2009; LaCom 2004; Borsay 2005) to re-assess the needlework produced by 'invalid women' as a 'vehicle for a degree of social and occupational inclusion'. Moving from a community of practice, but staying in Victorian and Edwardian London, the next essay considers entire communities as craft objects. In her chapter on 'Crafting Suburbia', Lily Crowther, whose detailed case-study of Camberwell in South London was published in this journal (3:2, July 2010), considers the London suburb as the creation of skilled craftsmen working within the building trades. Highlighting the importance of suburban Art Schools in providing craft education, Crowther discusses the literal building of communities and in her conclusion, draws upon the interdisciplinary methods of cultural geography and psycho-geography (Sinclair, 2003; Pile, 2005) to 're-imagine suburbia as a communal craftwork'. Similarly, collaboration and community building are the subjects of the final essay in this anthology, in which Alla Myzelev discusses the Guild of All Craft (GAA), a craft community founded in Ontario, Canada by Rosa and Herbert Clark during the 1930s. Inspired by the British Arts & Crafts Movement and the Guild Socialism of Robert Owen, the GGA revived the practice of hand-loom weaving and later became involved in preserving and collecting the architectural heritage of Toronto. Myzelev demonstrates that in its fifty year history the GAA 'managed to sever as several entities related to

aesthetic and functional crafts' starting as craft community and ending as a 'heritage site'.

*Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics* has successfully brought together work emanating from a range of related but distinct disciplines within historical scholarship. Each chapter addresses the inter-connectedness of material culture, craft and community: 'Craft as material culture speaks of community' and its explicit concern with the politics of craft, colonization and communities is significant; in particular where authors have linked their historical studies of craft to contemporary concerns such as Fair Trade and globalization. Similarly, the revisionist readings of Indigenous crafts make this anthology a rewarding and thought-provoking addition to current discussions within craft, which also offers multi-disciplinary models for the writing of craft history.

#### References:

Anderson, B., 1991, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso

Barthel, D., 1996, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers

Borsay, A., 2005, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain since 1750*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Helland, J., 2007, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries 1880-1914: Marketing Craft, Making Fashion*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press

LaCom, C., 2004, 'It is more than Lame': Female Disability, Sexuality and the Maternal in the Nineteenth-Century Novel' In David T. Mitchell and Sharon L Snyder (eds), *The Body and Physical Difference*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, pp. 189-201

Pile, S., 2005, *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life*, London: Routledge

Schweik, S., 2009, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*, New York: New York University Press

Sinclair, I., 2003, *London Orbital*, London: Penguin

Venkateswar, S., 2004, *Development and Ethnocide: Colonial Practices in the Andamans*, Copenhagen: International work Group for Indigenous Affairs

Wintle, C., 'Objects, Images, Imaginings: New Perspectives on the Material and Visual Culture of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands', *Journal of Museum Ethnography* (20: 2008) pp. 145-52

Wintle, C., 2013, *Colonial Collecting and Display: Encounters with Material Culture from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands*, Oxford: Berghahn

Emma Ferry

Nottingham Trent University