

IS IT ART, OR CRAFT?

By Ervin Somogyi

I've been asked to contribute some thoughts about what Art vs. Craft means to me. This simple-sounding request is actually a bit complex. Here is my thinking about art and what it signifies for me, in a nutshell, and with a bit of historical context added.

FOR STARTERS, WHERE DID "ART" COME FROM, ANYWAY?

From the time the first cave man had the urge to smear pigment onto a cave wall, art has been . . . well . . . something that only humans seem to do. It is an attempt at *representation* . . . of things that are both concrete and abstract. As far as we know, no other animal has or needs a representational life. It should be no surprise to anyone that art of any kind is a product of time, place, and culture. On the other hand the human need to engage in the act of representation is, very much by itself, a deep and surprising mystery.

Whether it is painted, carved, cast, written, or anything else, art is *symbolic*. It is also, most certainly, the proverbial elephant being felt by the blind men who thought the elephant was a tree, a leaf, a rope, a snake, or a house depending on what part of the beast they were touching. No one seems to know what art *really* is any more than we know what gravity is, despite the fact that we've lived with both art and gravity for millennia. As far as the latter is concerned, physicists today are butting their heads against the seemingly basic task of comprehending not only what gravity is, but why it should even exist -- along with such esoteric questions as why do atoms even have mass? The quest for that knowledge is great fun and frustration and, as far as I can tell, as compelling as is trying understand how a painting of a can of Campbell's Tomato Soup is great art. In any event I think this will be a more interesting story if I simply tell you what art means to me personally. But before I do that, I need to give you some general background.

SOME FACTOIDS AND STATISTICS

As far as man-made things go, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics tells us that there are more than twenty thousand different job descriptions of work that a citizen can do, all of which represent some cog in the great economic machine or thread in the great social fabric. Some of these jobs are quite useful in amazingly oddball ways. But how does being an artist fit into this? What, exactly, is one to

make of the . . . uh . . . astonishingly useless, personal, and highly impractical act of dabbing paint onto a piece of canvas? Who on earth would ever have started that kind of thing? And what were they thinking at the time? I mean, you can't eat it, wear it, ride it, climb it, grow it, smoke it, have sex with it, or use it to change a flat tire. You just look at it.

Well, as I said, art is an act of representation. It is an effort or effect that carries some kind of *significance*. Humans seem to have a need to do that. I'm pretty sure that the reason for this is that art gives a particular kind of satisfaction or release. It is sometimes described, subjectively, as being that which makes sense to you in such a way that you experience a momentary glimpse of a different reality; or being half-reminded of something that one had long ago forgotten. I think of it as an in-the-moment a liberation from tension -- as when one has a sense of "Aaah! That's it!", or when one has completed some inner task and thinks "O.K., I can stop now", and lays the burden down. But that's just me; as an elephant being palpated by blind men, art can really be a hobby, a business, occupational therapy, a practical outlet for creative energies, a political statement, an avocation, a quest for status and power, a personal obsession or depravity, a quest for the transcendent and the sublime, or some combination of these. Art can multi-task like you wouldn't believe and expensive images of Campbell's soup, vulvas, sunsets on Mars, and the Virgin Mary riding a Harley have been known to fit somewhere, somehow, into this spectrum.

MY OWN APPROACH AND MINDSET

I seem to have an artistic bent. I have always been like this and I cannot account for it; I just accept it as I do the fact that I'm right-handed. Some people explain this by citing brain organization or chemistry. In any event, I am drawn to things, images, designs, and effects that have beauty of a timeless kind, more so than things that seem trendy, fashionable, merely clever, or otherwise temporary. I don't know that I consciously look at things in this way, but I do know that I get more pleasure out of looking at (and making) artistic designs that look and feel "right" and satisfying to look at; and in my case I seem to gravitate toward more abstract and geometric imagery.

I know that words like "right" and "satisfying" are subjective words, and hence hard to define. But consider that these might actually mean something. The latter, for example, comes from the Latin *satis* + *facere*, meaning "enough done" or "to make full". In other words, it leaves you not wanting or desiring more. I think good art is art that satisfies, that doesn't leave you unfulfilled by somehow being incomplete or out of balance. It doesn't leave you wanting more, nor feeling stuffed. Pornography leaves you wanting more, and I'm not just talking about naked

people; pretty much any of the glitzy and artistically done ads and commercials with high production values that one sees everywhere nowadays, and whose job it is to persuade you to want one more thing, are pornographic by that standard. Cheap merchandise of all types, as well as artfully delivered sales pitches, always leave one vaguely dissatisfied. Political sloganeering is often disguised as art, and it exists to leave one feeling better or worse than one really is. Calm, balanced equanimity -- i.e., satisfaction -- is not what any of these is about.

A WORD ABOUT THE BIRTH OF "ART vs. CRAFT"

Today, there exists a division between "art" and "craft" which was, historically, not recognized. To the Greeks art and craft were one and the same, and it was a public phenomenon, not a private one. Art eventually became divided from craft, not because they are actually separate things, but rather because society (and its needs) changed.

That change started with the growth of the Middle Class and institutions such as the Organized Church, during the Renaissance -- which is often thought of as being a time of art and culture but was equally a time of exploration, conquest, and political and mercantile expansion. As the Middle Class and the Organized Church grew in both size and influence their members found they could afford -- and thus learned to desire -- the *private ownership* of wealth in the form of land, art and other things. (The Ruling class had always done this, of course, but its numbers were never significant.) In any event, as these new demographics and institutions grew, so did Art and Craft. Put in plain economic language: as demand grew so did supply. (We are seeing a similar growth today in China and its trying-mightily-to-be-prosperous neighbors.)

As far as "art vs. craft" goes, this division has been justified by the idea that craftwork represents artisanal creations that have some practical use or application, while "pure" artwork is more spiritual/creative, and eschews the merely practical. In a way, this division encapsulates the polarities around which the Middle Class and the Organized Church coalesced: one is concerned with the here-and-now and the other is concerned with the more abstract and transcendent "after now" . . . at least in theory; in fact, both of these have, like Mafiosi, always pursued their temporal territory, power, influence, wealth, and authority very jealously. In a further attempt to justify the separation between art and craft, "fine art" is currently sometimes also defined quite openly as *that work which is sold in art galleries*. Hmph.

Along those lines, some people in that world define art as comprising of paint on canvas or paper, glass, bronze, steel, and marble -- but not other materials such as wood, fabric, leather, aluminum, ceramic, fiberglass, or plastic. I repeat: hmpf. There is an interesting wrinkle to the private ownership of art, in that it most easily attaches to concrete objects like paintings, statuary, and other collectibles. It's a bit more problematic to "own" intangible and ephemeral art such as music, theatre, dance, poetry/literature, and even some memorable athletic performances; these are harder to possess and keep, and the art must be refreshed at every performance.

In any event, from my point of view, these lines in the sand are artificial and bogus. When art became divided from craft it was at the same time wedded to money, as part of the societal shift that served (1) how citizens of the community claimed identity and/or defined themselves, as well as (2) the commercial needs of the growing art-biz world and its adherents. As to the Greeks of yore, whether or not any of them or their institutions could have taken on the role of being the patrons and owners of privately held art, they appear as a group to instead have formed their cultural sense of the world, and of themselves, not through possession of goods but through tragic and comic theatre, the Olympic games, and public statuary. While there no doubt existed Greek misers, misanthropes, and idiots (the original meaning of which word was "one who does not participate in community events but rather attends to his affairs by himself") the meaningful culture of the classical Greece was a public and social one. Aside from that, the Greeks didn't have plastic or concrete and their clothing was practical rather than artistic. They didn't use much wood in their public art because most of their statuary was intended to be situated outdoors, and that material wouldn't have lasted as long as marble does. Those old Greeks may have lacked a fashion industry, but they weren't fools.

(Parenthetically, though, they weren't saints either. The Greek economy ran largely on owning slaves, which their philosophy and culture -- as well as those of all the tribes and nations around them -- seemed to freely accept. I mean, let's put love of art and truth into a proper wider context here, although I grant the Greeks that they (starting with Plato, at least) seem to have been the first to question the morality of slavery.)

MY TAKE ON THE MATTER

Many of the discussions that take place about art are often beside the point, because this is a territory in which words aren't really useful. What I mean by this is that there's a good chance that if you asked an artist what he was trying to accomplish in this or that work he'd be insulted that he had to explain it to you.

Having to use words would be a sort of admission of failure to communicate at a basic level.

I don't think that "art" is something that some "artist" puts into something that he's making, and which makes that object more attractive and spiritual in direct proportion to that artist's talent. In my own case it is more a channeling of something that comes through me but that I don't think is really mine in the sense that I "own" it as though I'd "invented" it. Interestingly, the word "invent" comes from the Latin *in* (in, into, or upon) + *venire* (to come -- as in Julius Caesar's *veni, vidi, vici*, meaning "I came, I saw, I conquered"); in other words, *to come upon*. It does not denote originating or creating anything so much as *finding* it -- as when one does an *inventory*.

For myself, I don't believe that there's any meaningful difference between "art" and "craft". I am all right with the idea that, outside of the commercial history of the thing, the Mona Lisa was/is a great crafts project. Good created work of any kind is something that has a special personal significance that really can't be measured in pounds, colors, dollars, medium, or inches. And then there's also Art With A Capital F which doesn't measure up regardless of what standard one uses. But I can tell you that good artcraft gives me a specific and subjective kind of endorphin rush.

MY ARTISTIC METAPHYSIC

I make guitars for a living. I work with, and love, wood. I don't know how that came about except that, without having had art training, I spent a lot of time carving, molding, whittling, and gluing things on my own as I grew up -- often using this plentiful, malleable, and available material. But there is also, for me, a metaphysical component in my present work. The metaphysic I bring to my work stems, I think, largely from significant losses and dislocations I experienced early in life. I won't go into that other than to mention it; further commentary is outside the scope of this writing.

Perhaps because of those losses and dislocations, however, I can relate to working wood as an act of reclamation and a sacrament. It is, for me, a bringing of things from the past together with things for the future. It is also an act of symbolically bringing dead things to life. I don't believe that you need to have traumatic life experiences to see wood for what it really is, though: it is nothing else than the skeletal remainder of a life form that once lived, took in nutrients, grew, adapted to its conditions, participated in the cycles of the seasons, took in sunlight and converted carbon dioxide into oxygen, produced seed and sap and fruit, interacted with other life forms by giving them food and shelter, held the soil

together as it put its roots out, propagated itself, lived a long life, and then died. Actually, was probably killed -- just as animals and plants everywhere are killed to serve our species' needs. Every piece of spruce or cedar I've ever made into a guitar top has been some 125 to 400 years old [count the annular rings in your own guitar top] -- and that's just in the eight or ten inch wide slice I normally use: the old-growth spruces and cedars are often six feet in diameter! It seems remarkable to me to work with part of a tree that was alive when the philosopher Baruch Benedict Spinoza ground his glass lenses for a living, when William Shakespeare and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart were expressing their creative genius, when Francisco Pizarro conquered Peru, when Anton van Leeuwenhoek made the first microscope and gave mankind its first awareness of microbial life, or when our great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandparents were courting -- *and which was furthermore almost certainly alive until within our own lifetimes.* The phrase about not seeing the forest for the trees comes to mind in this regard, although it's more like not seeing the tree for the wood. I feel that by working with this unique material I'm able to participate in life in a larger, deeper and more intimate way than by having a regular, ordinary job.

Reality isn't all that simple and linear, though. I have observed that regardless of what one does for a living, or how extraordinary or fascinating that might be, there comes a point . . . at around the twenty-year mark . . . when it becomes interesting to do something else. In my case also, the excitement of making guitars hit a wall at around my own twenty-year mark; I began to be receptive to doing something new. It was at that point that I got interested in doing artistic woodwork without the need to also build a guitar along with it. The result was a body of wood carvings and inlays that is based in and inspired by the techniques, traditions, and materials of traditional guitar and lute making. In terms of the art-craft divide, this work lacks the practical usefulness of being a guitar, and is more genuinely "art", or at least "really cool decoration". For me, that distinction is not important: I get a thrill from producing both guitars and wood carvings/inlays -- either by themselves or in combination. Part of this body of work can be seen on my website, www.esomogyi.com.

Finally, each of us, as adults, carries our early life experiences inside of ourselves until we die. I certainly do. And this internalization has, quite naturally, informed my understanding and expectations of the world. Therefore, as far as the "Ervin as an artist" package goes, I believe that I produce my artwork -- whether in guitar or art-for-the-wall form -- in part so as to contribute beauty to a world which I see as being sorely lacking in it.

ART/BEAUTY: IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER?

Finally -- not that this has anything significant to do with the matter at hand -- there is a longstanding academic debate among . . . uh . . . perfectly worthy pedants and polemicists as to whether beauty (which is an alias that Art sometimes travels under) lies in the object or the eye of the beholder. It seems to me that this kind of either-or question is of the "have you stopped beating your wife yet?" type; it disallows an answer outside of its own categories. Art and craft, if one wishes to make the distinction, are actually a kind of partnership between object and viewer, which is a concept that I first came across in Robert Pirsig's book Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, and which I commend to your attention. Also, for anyone interested in knowing more about the ins and outs of the human creative process, I also recommend The Dynamics of Creation, an entirely accessible and enlightening book by British psychiatrist Anthony Storr.