

# THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

## The concept of crafts as an economic symbol

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The search for earning a living in modern society is carried out in very different ways. There are those who start working with an employer, but there are many who, lacking that luck, find themselves in the need to organize their own business. By focusing attention on those who earnestly seek to earn a living through a small business, a large group of people from San Cristóbal de Las Casas were discovered who sell or produce a set of merchandise that in a very broad sense constitutes the business of crafts. This led to the question about what is hidden behind said term.

### **A. Crafts: a problematic definition**

Almost everyone knows when they are in a store where crafts are sold. However, the definition of these objects is very difficult. Rivers of ink have flowed in search of its definition, but one that satisfies is also lacking.

The word artisan began to be used in the year 1440, when it was taken from the Italian *artigiano*, which in turn had taken *cortigiano* (courtier) as a model. Later, in the year 1490, the word crafts began to be used to identify the objects made by these subjects. Thus, medieval guilds began to be made up of artisans and produced crafts.

During the long colonial period, the Spanish brought some of their institutions to the American continent, such as the craft guilds. In Mexico, during the Viceroyalty, two types of associations were organized: the brotherhoods that had the constitutions as their legal status and the guilds regulated by ordinances. In this way, on March 15, 1524, the first ordinance was decreed for blacksmiths, in 1542 for silk makers, in 1546 for embroiderers, in 1548 for chair makers, etc.

These guilds did not ensure a monopoly on production since a large part of the goods were manufactured outside of them. In the codex called *Matricula de tributos*, the Aztecs made an inventory of products that were manufactured before the Spanish invasion. These continued to be produced and sold in the city markets despite the political reorganization that the Spanish irruption entailed. Without denying the importance of the guilds, we must point out that they were fundamentally an urban

organization compared to the mass of the population employed in agricultural work. Naturally, the peasant should not be automatically identified with an artisan, but in the “Indian towns” and other peasant groups they continued to produce utensils, textiles and objects prior to the Hispanic invasion.

It is important to note that regarding the current territories of southeastern Mexico and Guatemala, during those years included in the Audiencia de los Confines, they practically lacked guilds of artisans, outside of the guild of silversmiths founded around 1553 in the city of Santiago. of Guatemala, the others were of little importance due to the smallness of the cities. Proof of this is that in 1632 the guilds were still being organized, through regulating the entrance exams for officers. To this must be added the fact that “Guatemala's artisans were not the only ones dedicated to workshop industries; The religious, in their indisputable and magnificent civilizing work, had taught the indigenous peoples the manual arts.”

During the colony, the guilds could not consolidate their position and slowly became extinct. The coup de grace was given in 1812 when the ordinances and constitutions were abolished. However, in Mexico they wanted to revive these institutions because between 1844 and 1845 the “Artisans Promotion Board” was founded. The final decision to end the guilds was made until 1856 with the Confiscation Law.

The desire for union protection was not forgotten since industrialization stimulated, at the level of workers, the formation of brotherhoods, mutual associations, cooperatives and professional groups.

Thus, those who continued to work in home workshops continued to be called artisans. For a time, the position of these workers compared to the nascent capitalists was idealized.

In the Mexico of the Porfiriato, José María González in his writing, from craftsmanship to socialism, expresses that a social revolution is the only way to alleviate worker suffering, end the usurpation of land and legitimize the struggle of workers to protect them from the accusations of communists. According to this precursor of Mexican socialism, “worker unification” was the only means that would guarantee social progress. Likewise, he is the first to criticize the aestheticist visions of crafts because he strongly censures the initiative to find an “artistic-industrial” society above the initiative of the workers.

This issue illustrates historically because it proves that since the Porfiriato, a group of people thought they could influence the designs of popular goods. That is to say, the promotion of an “artistic-industrial” society shows that at the end of the last century there began to be a fascination with locally produced articles compared to those coming from the industry that made intensive use of a technology that saves human energy and It produces cheap goods in series.

Indeed, the industrial revolution and military aggression, a combination known as imperialism, took over markets. Through the use of force and the offer of cheap goods, items manufactured by local industries were displaced, which due to their links with a traditional demand were not transformed in the indicated sense. At the beginning of the century, the triumph of industrial goods was obvious, this provokes a nostalgic feeling to find those objects from local industry with the same quality with which they used to be produced. The way in which the generalization of this feeling of valuing products that will be called artisanal occurs does not fail to explain many things. Surprisingly, the same owners of the large monopolistic industries that dominate the world at the beginning of the 20th century will be the ones who promote an attitude aimed at protecting what remains of the form of production surpassed by modern industry. Due to historical coincidences, the elaboration of a rationalization of that feeling occurred in Mexico.

In 1921, President Alvaro Obregón decided that a “retrospective art exhibition” would be held in commemoration of the first centenary of the republic. To fulfill this task, a commission was formed made up of Jorge Enciso, Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murilo) and Roberto Montenegro. The theoretical justification of the criteria that said commission followed was developed by Dr. Atl and had to become a primary element for the appreciation of what is understood as craftsmanship.

Dr. Atl, a privileged student of the Porfiriato, was able to display his ingenuity until the revolutionary airs had calmed down. The exhibition guide resulted in a hasty, emphatic but meaningful text about the reasons that inspired the exhibition. This was intended to be a sample of Mexican ingenuity that, according to the manager, was proverbial not only in traditional production but had also been demonstrated in the industrial centers of the United States.

Regarding the characterization of crafts, the definition that was offered about the content of the exhibition is illustrative: “In the name of popular arts are summarized all the manifestations of the ingenuity and skill of the people of Mexico - those that have a purely artistic nature and those of an industrial nature. I also include literary and musical productions in this name.” This definition was not very original because in those years, those expressions in Europe were summarized with the concept of folklore. The new bias of the exhibition consisted of presenting items that could be found in popular markets in a refined environment, some of which, as noted, were beginning to be scarce or could not be found with the same quality as those exhibited.

"I categorically affirm - wrote Dr. Atl - that the indigenous industries of any country cannot be transformed - they are a product of such a peculiar way, so closely linked to the idiosyncrasy of their products, that to touch them is to destroy them." Such a declaration became the precedent for demonstrations in favor of the protection of crafts as a concretion of the national heritage. A problematic issue was that according to Dr. Atl, if these products remained subject to the market they would fall into

inevitable decline. Hence, the State had to intervene in its promotion and protection, above the commercial relationship.

The exhibition attracted the attention of many people, but the enthusiasm it aroused in the American Katherine Ann Porter was decisive, who decided to take the exhibition to Los Angeles, California, in 1923. There, a year earlier, she republished the exhibition book in English. by Dr. Atl under the title Outline of Mexican arts and crafts. That is to say: a compendium of Mexican arts and crafts, which will once again serve as a guide in this new exhibition. Thus, in California it was already clearly stated that the central thing was to exhibit crafts.

In 1924, Manuel Gamio wrote an article aimed at highlighting the possibilities of indigenous art within the framework of the Pan-American movement. Later in 1925, he points specifically to crafts when he considers the useful aspects of folklore. The function of the concept of art with the Products of popular industry will be maintained from then on, for example, in 1927, José Juan Tablada in his History of Mexican Art, will consider crafts.

The successive exhibitions of “popular art” left the idea that similar things could be done. Thus, the Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, sponsored by the League of Nations, launched a worldwide call to hold the first International Congress of Popular Arts from October 7 to 13, 1928 in Prague. In the call it was announced that "more special consideration will be given to the traditional work of the artisan (...) or the artistic expression of the utilitarian nature of the object or its function in social life." As an example of the discrimination that was carried out during the hegemony of the European powers, Mexico was not invited to the exhibition. The slowness with which action was taken in those years is evident since the publication of a book that summarized the exhibition was carried out three years later.

That same year, in 1928, Adolfo Best Margard, Drawing Method, was published. Tradition, resurgence and evolution of Mexican art, text aimed at artisans to perfect their technique. In 1930, Fernández Ledesma described Mexican footwear and toys.

In the contribution to defining what would be the scope of what is defined as crafts, indigenism came to join. This current would acquire a Pan-American character (i.e. for the entire continent) because of the so-called Washington Pacts, which began between 1889 and 1890 at the First International American Conference. Among the points discussed by the delegations of the independent countries of America was the situation of what they classified as indigenous populations. An important consequence of these meetings was the founding, in Mexico, of the International School of American Archeology and Ethnology, which began activities in 1910, when the Porfiriato celebrated the first centenary of independence.

In 1916, during the second Pan American Scientific Congress, the Mexican delegate Manuel Gamio, director of that School, proposed the creation of an institution

of practical action on the indigenous population. Remember that Gamio had studied at the University of Columbia and therefore had knowledge of the US Bureau of Indian Affairs. Furthermore, as outlined above, Gamio definitively united the concept of crafts with popular and indigenous art.

However, it was not until 1936 that the autonomous department of indigenous affairs was created in Mexico. With this background, similar institutes began to be founded throughout the continent, especially after the First Inter-American Indian Congress of 1940. Common to these organizations was the purpose of “protecting” the indigenous people. To this central intention was immediately added the protection of what was called at that time “indigenous arts.”

What followed was the institutional adaptation of the government to that sector. The important milestones along that path are recounted below. In 1951 the Board of Popular Arts and Industries was founded. In 1955 the National Foreign Trade Bank carried out studies on the sector. In 1961, the fund for the Promotion of Crafts was created as a trust for the National Cooperative Development Bank. That same year, the Bank of Mexico established “Plata Industrializada” S.A. and the Temoaya pilot center to produce rugs and carpets. In 1969, the second National Congress of Crafts was convened, which resulted the following year in the establishment of the National Council of Crafts. the Handicrafts that will oversee the “Palace of the Handicrafts”. In that year, 1970, the Ministry of Public Education established the General Directorate of Popular Art that will oversee a handicraft design school and a school workshop. At the Latin American level, design was also accepted, as evidenced by the first inter-American course on artisanal design held in Bogotá on July 3, 1978.

In 1979, the first seminar on artisanal problems was held, where Rodolfo Becerril Straffon declared that artisans represented 10% of the population and contributed 0.1% of the GNP. That same year, the Inter-American Center for Crafts and Popular Arts (CIDAP) was created in Cuenca, Ecuador, directed by Gerardo Martínez Espinosa with the technical advice of Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla.

In the seventies, institutions, museums, workshops were created and studies on crafts were carried out. In the eighties, the installation of craft shops and workshops was organized from the municipal to the national level. Thus, in 1984, the Chiapaneca Crafts Institute was founded as a department of the State government and opened a store in Tuxtla-Gutiérrez.

Now, if this story does not serve to clarify the concept of crafts, at least it makes clear: how an economic sector has been defined by the State. In other words, we assume that state policies carried out a division on the mass of merchandise that was in the national market, through the separation of a group; It also determines that its production must be protected and consequently enters as a marketing agent and promoter of their production. During that time, various theorists have made efforts to point out the general characteristics that these objects have, however, no agreement

has been reached. Currently, very diverse positions will be found in the conceptual definition of crafts.

## **B. Different theoretical positions for the study of crafts.**

During this century, as has been noted, there is a lot of writing on crafts, which allows authors to be grouped into various trends.

Naturally, this arrangement is not intended to indicate social groups but rather to clarify trends or possible typical intellectual elaborations in the definition of craftsmanship.

### **1. Rating by personal taste**

To classify objects that should be considered crafts, many tend to resort to their discretion. They consider that their refined taste is what allows them to distinguish in a bazaar what is worthy of entering their homes as decoration and what does not have that privilege.

Isabel Marín de Paalen made a classification where she sharpens her peculiar criteria. Thus, for her, the products she seeks to study can be classified into popular art, ethnocrafts, semi-industrialized crafts and Mexican curious. The key to her classification is found precisely when she defines this last category: “it does not escape the production of pieces of dubious and deformed taste.” So, it turns out that the supreme judge of artisanal production is the exquisite buyer.

Obviously, this criterion has very little use if we seek the precision of the concepts. But it explains a lot of the consumerist fashions of the so-called crafts, especially in wealthy sectors. The purchase seeks the unique object; For this reason, it is not unusual to find authors such as Miguel Covarrubias who, in his text entitled *Selected Works of Popular Art*, attempted to divide it into indigenous tribal art and true popular art. For this author, this last category is intended for the use of the middle class and has roots in Spain and China. It should be noted that during the years in which he was writing such criteria, the 1950s, Alfred Metraux saw the need to explain the replacement of “indigenous art” with “popular art” to avoid the pejorative meaning of indigenous.

Prejudices such as racism, accusations of bad taste, do not currently have an audience in intellectual circles, but they are important in directing the tastes of the dominant sectors of society, especially when it comes to a product such as handicrafts.

Very close to this attitude are also the definitions interested in aesthetics. Such studies on crafts express the search for a particularization that distances them from

production. The objectification of the work, the time used and the social character that concentrates the artisanal object provoke a mystical amazement among some.

When Ana Biro de Stern studied the art of the indigenous people of Chalco, she stated that because social practice is reflected in that art, the farmers were magical, and the hunters were realistic. However, she comes to the curious conclusion that primitive art is incapable of artistic effects since it only seeks to reproduce a model.

It turns out then that thinkers who emphasize the subjective almost always bring with them an attitude of aesthetic arbiters of their faculties. This authority reflects their class position since in most cases they are wealthy people who have decided to select the beautiful among the multiple objects made by members of the working classes. Criticism of this attitude was developed during the 18th century, both through fables and plays on one level the story of the emperor's suit and on another the beautiful ridiculous ones that make fun of those who live despising their tastes and without daring to express themselves. in a personal and spontaneous way.

Although it is fully understood that subjective criteria do not help in the understanding of the social, they will always continue to exist because the legitimation of social position needs to appeal to supposed characteristics that are possessed personally and shared with the dominant group. In the same way, there will be those who consider that by adding a detail or changing a color, the product is ready to be consumed by refined people. This sparked a debate with those who thought, like Dr. Atl, that touching the crafts was destroying them.

## **2. Conservatives and innovators**

Although divided, many officials and thinkers linked to state action contributed to forming this current of opinion. On the one hand, there will be those who refuse to introduce new techniques in the production of crafts and on the other those who openly advocate and promote their introduction; What is common in both is that with their attitude they seek to be benefactors of the artisans. In 1940, meeting at the aforementioned first Inter-American Indigenous Congress in Pátzcuaro, government representatives from Latin America called for the enactment of laws in favor of indigenous arts.

A response to that appeal occurred in Guatemala where the artisanal sector had gained importance in national economic activity due to its export capacity. There, by decree of September 19, 1947, the revolutionary government of Guatemala ordered the protection of the quality, production and price of handicrafts. This policy did not continue for long as the USA helped to overthrow the democratic regime and established anti-popular governments favorable to its interests. Just as they restored the former owners of the land, they disbanded the unions and agrarian leagues, they persecuted intellectuals, they also left aside state intervention in the production of

crafts, calling it “communist policy.” Until 1970, a department for the promotion of crafts and small industries was re-formed in Guatemala.

Meanwhile, the Pátzcuaro congress had repercussions in Mexico, giving strength to those who were in favor of supporting the crafts industry. In 1942, Manuel Gamio pointed out that indigenous people were the basis of nationality, so their economic and health living conditions should be improved. As well as being scientifically advised to receive contributions from modern culture. In that sense it was important to revalue artisanal work.

Another renowned thinker, Alfonso Caso, designed many criteria that guided state action, among these, the one that referred to the government promotion of crafts. In his article published in 1942: The Protection of Popular Arts, he stated that popular art is a spontaneous product of the Mexican people so it should be protected and maintain its authenticity. For this purpose, he recommended the creation of a council.

In the same way as Dr. Atl, he considered the market a corrupter of craftsmanship. "The demand for the articles can engender large-scale production, which little by little loses its popular characteristics - Sentence Case - due to the introduction of strange ideas and motives among producers, sellers and buyers of popular art objects." The problem with such an attitude is that family workshops and factories are condemned not to exceed the social level of their businesses. In other words: a potter will always be the same, he can never aspire to be considered an industrialist because from the point of view of their sponsors this is negative, even though a large part of the "benefactors" are relatives or they themselves form this social group.

This position implies an option for development with terrible characteristics because it deliberately opposes the implementation of local production, social mechanisms, technical innovations, diversification of energy sources, inventions, renovations and reconversions that characterize the industrial revolution. . Some argued with concrete examples that the changes (acculturation process) had impoverished the crafts. This is how the case of Canada was put forward, where the resurgence of this production had to be sought through an induced process. In that same year, 1942, the Inter-American Indigenous Institute advised keeping indigenous art out of mass production and respecting its originality. However, for the impoverished peoples of America, the artisanal problem was not a marginal fact, a revaluation of folklore or keeping a tradition alive, but a decision about their social development. Therefore, it was about mobilizing all possible forces to achieve internal and external industrialization.

A point in Caso's favor was his confrontation with those who argued a lack of beauty in many crafts. Because he lacked adequate training in aesthetics, he could not draw a line with the subjective qualifications of these "dictators of fashion", which if



accepted would have meant eliminating state protection for a large part of the production of crafts because they lacked good taste.

Caso solved the problem through defining crafts. He considered that the appropriate concept was that of popular arts since they did not consist of exclusive activities of the indigenous people, they did not represent a continuation of pre-Cortesian products, and they were not for exclusive consumption by the indigenous people. "Popular art is those aesthetic manifestations that are a spontaneous product of the cultural life of the Mexican people; the works of art in which the artist expresses his inspiration and through his technique that is a spokesperson for the artistic spirit of the people." From that account, any spontaneous work was beautiful because it was Mexican. Consequently, all popular art had to be protected; In fact, it implied that any productive activity of the poor had to be supported.

The characteristics that served to identify this fruitful sector are listed: in general, they were home-based industries, they used manual labor or simple instruments and were mostly family-owned, although there were workshops. Later, Caso insists that no - new models must be introduced. The fundamentals of the support should consist of lowering the cost of raw materials and promoting sales. He points out that good quality raw materials result in the product. If it is considered that the inputs consist of 10%, at most, of the final price, their improvement will not be reflected in the market.

Caso's ideas were taken up in the indigenous action carried out by the State. In 1949, an exhibition was held by the Department of Social Action on the Indigenous Population and the Promoting Committee of Popular and Indian Plastic Arts of the State of Michoacán. The Popular Art Directorate is organized at the National Indigenous Institute.

Once an intensive agricultural distribution was carried out, the problem of increasing agricultural productivity arose. In 1945, during the first National Revolutionary Congress of Agrarian Law, an important debate was generated. When Manuel Gamio intervened, he pointed out that the agricultural crisis was not the responsibility of the ejidatarios; that crops should be planted with a view to export and insists that the diversification of the countryside implies the introduction of agroindustries and promotion of crafts. These ideas did not remain in the debates, but a project of agricultural development and craft production, anthropological research and cultural activities in the Mezquital Valley was defined, which began in 1949. This valley was known for the crafts made by the Otomi; What was new about the project was the introduction of new techniques. Thus, during the 1950s, a debate on this point arose.

In 1951, those responsible for the Mezquital Valley project were openly attacked, so there was a need for an unofficial defense. The Inter-American Indigenous Institute pointed out that the measures adopted to improve the quality of crafts did not

undermine originality. One of the reasons why they tried to improve the quality of the products was due to a drop in demand, mainly from the USA, since after the Second World War, the North American industry was once again offering consumer goods; another was due to the change in tastes that occurred in the 1950s when the austerity that had characterized the war years was left behind.

But the heated debate occurred precisely from 1951 in relation to the indigenous textile technology center of Ecuador. Although international policy had not changed, this center was in Otavalo near Quito and intended to develop the cashmere industry from locally produced wool fabrics. It all started when an "ILO expert" made a promotional article about the so-called Andean mission of that office that worked there. With a rather clumsy style, the content was an elegy to modernization that meant the abandonment of traditional techniques for oiled machines, etc.

After reading the article in English, Daniel F. Rubín de la Borbolla cried foul, accusing the author, Raúl Salinas, of doing everything wrong. For Rubín de la Borbolla, there was an accepted method to support craftsmanship that consisted of starting from an inventory, studying the sources of supply, knowing the techniques, tools and work system and finally collecting old and new pieces.

"Technical improvement in a manual craft is justifiable and necessary," says Rubín de la Borbolla, "as long as it does not restrict the traditional free expression and sensitivity of the artisan or modify the shape and decoration of the object he produces; "It is advisable when it avoids the unnecessary waste of human energy as long as the product does not change." This conservative position was one that had been held for years and was facing his first challenge.

Another member of the ILO Andean mission, Jan Schreuder, responded with an open letter to the director of the Museum of Popular Arts and Industries of Mexico, Rubín de la Borbolla. He claimed that he only introduced new technical resources without distorting traditional designs. But there was some truth in the accusations leveled at him since his explanations were ambivalent. In effect, he justifies innovations by pointing out that artisans need to find a market for their products, however he rejects that they seek to take over the market. Such an argument is highly debatable, since not only were the artisans asked not to modernize their production, but they were also being asked to go to the market with a different logic than the other sellers, this is self-restricting free competition.

The point was that the Andean mission made up of Europeans simply transmitted the logic of the industrial revolution to a given process. If any production seeks to survive in the market, it must innovate; it must also seek to maximize profit and carry out all production in the market without thinking about its competitors. However, the opinion that had been shared since the beginning of the appreciation of crafts ignored this need. From that account they had many conflicts of conscience; For this reason, Schreuder, although he defends technical progress, finally gives in to Rubín de

la Borbolla: “our goal is to save indigenous art in its purest simplicity.” For this purpose, he points out that he recovers the Inca techniques and limits himself to generalizing the designs to other pieces.

As this was a controversy that occurred within international organizations and between countries with diplomatic relations, it did not continue or escalate. In 1955, the Inter-American Indian Institute settled the discussion by accepting the modernization and introduction of machinery for crafts but preserving “the artistic character of the forms and decorations conceived by the Indian.” This last phrase sought to support the position of conservatives against innovators.

As stated at the beginning of this section, both positions had in common the search for protection of artisans. Fundamentally, it was a practical problem, where innovating or conserving was an alternative in production that would be defined in terms of offering support to artisans. This attitude would be sustained by Daniel F. Rubín de la Borbolla when he put his attention on the marketing and distribution mechanisms, just as he began to insist that the fundamental thing was to improve the situation of artisans. In 1966, as host of the first Latin American seminar on crafts and popular arts, he joined the resolutions that sought to protect the cultural heritage of ethnic groups, improve crafts and the social status of the artisan. And to the surprise of many, in 1979, Rubín de la Borbolla himself declared that artisanal design is as old as culture, which is why it must be studied throughout history to apply it to crafts. In other words, he was embracing innovation of both design and process; It should be noted that at that time he was working in Ecuador, as noted above when referring to CIDAP.

### **3. Theorizations**

Parallel to government action, the need arose to theorize, under criteria other than the subjective approach, about the production of crafts. It was a work aimed at clarifying not only the concept but the place of crafts in society. The explanations included in this position are very diverse, ranging from the exemplary to the very abstract.

#### **a. Demonstrative definitions**

The definition of what a craft is is done by identifying the objects. One of the first works carried out in Chiapas is done with this criterion. Cuauhtémoc Suárez Grajales does not worry about definitions but rather makes an inventory of the products by locality, taking them as crafts. As indicated, to promote crafts previously an inventory had to be made. In this way, in Chile, many people drew attention to this production to promote the protection of indigenous minorities.

Within this position we can include those who carry out classifications based on objects, almost always highly illustrated catalogues. The terms majolica, textiles, lapidary, wood, basketry, luthiery, feather art, etc., are the framework in which the crafts will appear. In 1946, Jaime Torres Bodet was the one who expressed his support for this classification system of popular art. The studies should be catalogs of products, he pointed out, in which verse, prose and music should not be considered because they were the stuff of folklore. With this, although late, he wanted to reduce Dr. Atl's broad criteria. From that point of view, popular art was reduced to plastic arts, "and anyone who does not realize this is very clumsy," he said.

In order not to lack skill, the catalogs ordered by the Mexican government try to follow these criteria. Amanda Tarazona Zermeño and Walda Tommasi de Magrelli divide crafts into utilitarian and artistic, obviously ignoring Kantian transcendental epistemology; Next, for each State of Mexico, they classify the objects, present tables showing the towns and crafts that they recognize, and finally indicate the sales positions.

From 1980 to 1986, in Guatemala, the Regional Subcenter of Crafts and Popular Arts of the OAS dedicated itself to carrying out an inventory. In that work, among the products listed, metal products, leather and, above all, construction materials appear. It is interesting to highlight the latter as they serve to point out that the sample definitions work based on the sensitivity of the researcher. Also in Guatemala, the first artisanal census was carried out in 1978, which indicates the importance of the sector in countries with insufficient development of modern industry.

## **b. Symbolic studies**

Symbolic studies on crafts have very varied scopes. Some intend to refer to artisanal objects, pointing out their multiple meanings; Others, on the contrary, seek to carry out a critique of culture in all its extension.

Among the first we can point out José Tudela de la Orden, who was interested in the crafts of what had been Spanish colonies: America and the Philippines. When it was time to put them in order, he deemed it appropriate to classify them. From that account he affirmed that the following classes existed: first, that which unites man with his god; second, what remembers and celebrates the dead; third, what is used to work; fourth, what is worn; fifth, what man amuses himself with; sixth, what he uses in his house; and seventh, what adorns his house. Although he does not mention what the woman enjoys, it must be assumed that the taste of some supposes that of the others. Another study that follows this line of work is that of Nelson Graburn, which refers to considering the social role of indigenous art in relation to the use it has within the ethnic group and what he calls the "refunctionalization" by national society.

With broader ambitions, representative of the latter, Néstor García Canclini, in the book *Premio de Casa de las Américas 1981*, pointed out that there were four types of artisanal consumption: the practical, within daily life; the ceremonial linked to religious or festive activities; the sumptuary, which serves as social distinction; and aesthetic or decorative intended to decorate, especially homes. However, the classification was of lesser importance compared to its fundamental interest: explaining crafts and festivals.

It should not be surprising that in 1981 a definition appeared to the effect that “Crafts, therefore, are and are not a pre-capitalist product,” since García Canclini wanted to be dialectical. To further clarify his concept, he points out that the dominant classes break the unity of the circulation of goods from production, which causes crafts to undergo a kind of metamorphosis: “in the first, the use value prevails for the community that she manufactures it, associated with the cultural value that its design and iconography have for her; in the second the market exchange value predominates; in the third, the cultural (aesthetic) value of the tourist, which inscribes him in his symbolic system, different - and sometimes opposed - to that of the indigenous. Once these dislocations have been pointed out, he dedicates himself to expressing the diverse symbolic character that the artisanal object contains in each of the stages. The problem with this work is that, instead of explaining historically and concretely why in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru and other Latin American countries, there are crafts in large numbers, it reduces it to the statement of “Craft production as a necessity of capitalism.” He uses many pages to criticize Levi-Strauss for not making use of history, and his work incurs the same omission. “Our thesis, at this point, is that crafts such as popular festivals and other popular manifestations subsist and grow because they fulfill functions in the social reproduction and division of labor necessary for the expansion of capitalism,” says García Canclini. Then, he attributes the causes of the promotion to: “the deficiencies of the agrarian structure, the needs of consumption, the tourist stimulus and state promotion.” The idea of a perfidious social demiurge appears behind the shop windows of the national fund for the promotion of Mexican crafts, FONART, which are portrayed in his book.

In his new work, published by the Ministry of Public Education of Mexico, making his way through quotes from Celant, Bourdieu, Habermas and Inodoro Pereyra, he seeks to launch his poisoned darts against the unconscious mortals who dared to buy a sheet of drawn amate paper in the San Angel park of the Federal District and take it to its home, confusing kingdom of Kitsch.

In the nineties, the popular was promoted for García Canclini as staging. “Three currents are protagonists of this theatricalization: folklore, cultural industries and political populism.” The intertwined economic reasons have already been left behind because, as the author indicates, such explanations were based on the then predominant theory about the place of peasant production in the Mexican capitalist formation: “Crafts would be a specific form of participation in this unequal system, one

more way to extract surpluses and weaken the ethnic organization.” In the nineties, fashion has changed and therefore no economic reason should be mentioned, for the Doctor of Philosophy from Buenos Aires and Nanterre.

In the same way, it is no longer the dominant classes that disorganize the perfect correspondence of the levels in which society is ordered. For the author they are “folklorists and anthropologists for museums (from the twenties and thirties), communication scientists for the mass media (from the fifties), political sociologists for the State or for opposition parties and movements (since the seventies).

But, obsessed by the evil that the artisans of Ocumicho, Michoacán, model in clay, he continues to observe it behind the displays that sell handicrafts. The sale of these is due, “at least, to four types of causes: a) the impossibility of incorporating the entire population into urban industrial production; b) the market's need to include traditional symbolic structures and goods in mass communication circuits, to reach even the popular strata less integrated into modernity; c) in the interest of political systems to take into account folklore in order to strengthen their hegemony and legitimacy; d) continuity in the cultural production of the popular sectors.” He is no longer the capitalist demiurge but the modern Mephistopheles, Goethe's, the one who glimpses.

However, it is interesting to note that it does not agree to define what a craft is. The opposition between the modern and the traditional, a new translation of capitalist and pre-capitalist, continues to be sustained. Craftsmanship, in this position, consists of a reality. Remaining unexplained, it is through intuition that craftsmanship is defined and what is not such is discriminated against. This imprecision implicitly entails intellectual abandonment.

It is very unfortunate that using the concept of social construction we do not realize that it consists of the development of something new and not of perverting essences. In effect, the accumulation of definitions, the specification of the work that has historically been described as artisan, the delimitation and discrimination of merchandise made by social subjects in the market, are what determine what will be understood as crafts; It is a historical term and therefore acquires a specific meaning at each moment of social development over time. Intellectual work consists of discovering its essence and not accepting the imprecise world of appearance as valid.

What was modern yesterday will be outdated tomorrow, what yesterday could not be distinguished among the merchandise of a market, today is discriminated thanks to the conceptual social construction as craftsmanship. Unfortunately, it is very easy to get lost in the approach that seeks to make a global critique of society through craftsmanship, in which case the author is more interested in perversion than in the understanding of cultural creation.

### **c. Art vs. craft**

A quite peculiar position is the one generated from the Center for Folkloric Studies of the University of San Carlos of Guatemala. This center founded in 1967 found that after decades of neglect, popular culture needed to be studied. With this task, crafts became an object of attention from the beginning. To determine its meaning, an attempt was made to construct an ideal type.

Following Paulo Carvalho Neto, its founder and first director Roberto Díaz Castillo deemed it appropriate to make a difference between popular art and crafts. The first is a personal and domestic craft, learned at home, unrelated to organized production, with easily available materials, simple tools and produces unique objects; while the second implies a workshop, division of labor, there is a master with apprentices to whom he pays salaries and produces articles in series.

The characterization of artisans, in this methodology that Weber recalls, involves a classification: a) the full-time owner of a workshop who delivers his production to an intermediary; b) those who complement their agricultural activities with crafts and supply intermediaries; and c) the merchant producer who sells to wholesalers and the public.

The idea that corruption came from the market continued. In effect, the artist, upon satisfying the demand, begins to copy and therefore produce serial articles, thereby becoming a craftsman. Furthermore, purchases by foreign tourists and intermediaries have a negative effect on the work of artists because due to their economic situation they cannot miss the opportunity to sell but in doing so they do not establish a price in relation to the cost of production. The result is “an extremely dependent and exploited artisan.” Thus, the popular artist wanting to escape poverty falls into a spider web that is woven by the intermediary who knows the market.

Olga Pérez Molina further took this position as it requires that artists and artisans belong to “a popular sector, bearer of the historical, cultural and social heritage of the people. In that sense, a well-off person who carried out work identical to that carried out in a locality would not be considered crafts because it would not be popular. Sharing Lombardi Satriani's criteria, the author points out that craftsmanship contains a challenge to the prevailing social system. Obviously, it seems very extreme to point out that a basin or a sandal expresses this or that content.

Furthermore, the problem with this position is that the participants themselves, when carrying out the studies, never separate the concepts of popular art and crafts. The title of a work done in 1976, by Díaz Castillo, is: Popular arts and crafts of Sacatepéquez, for example. Hence, the ideal type of the popular artist has more of an explanatory character of the aesthetic vocation of each artisan, but in concrete studies it must be dispensed with. The speed with which designs are copied and generalized

makes it very difficult to distinguish an artist from a craftsman; many times, the same person shares both qualifications.

#### **d. Economic analysis**

To define this trend, a series of studies are considered on specific production processes that also include the social situation of the artisan. These investigations seek to serve as a basis to guide economic improvement measures not only in the sector but in each country.

Investigations into the production of crafts began early. In 1941, D.J. Allan pointed out that the fur industry helped rehabilitate Indians in Canada. Pedro Armillas, upon visiting the town of Olinalá in 1949, analyzed the production conditions to propose improving the sale of crafts. Many times, the theorization is limited since they relate an experience of economic management like that of Carlos Inchaustegui on the problems of marketing their products by the Mazatecs, among which are naturally handicrafts. The seventies were prolific in plans to found marketing companies, both for sale in the international market and to market products from indigenous gatherers from the Amazon rainforest. Naturally, there is never a shortage of those who criticize all actions related to the promotion of crafts as an economic activity; For example, in 1960, the Ecuadorian Institute of Anthropology and Geography pointed out that the Andean mission carried out actions outside the cultural context and away from social reality.

Another set of studies relates the socioeconomic system of the artisan to the production of crafts. Studies carried out in Ecuador by Anibal Buitrón follow this criterion, referring to Otavalo, linking textile crafts to the cargo system, agriculture and the market. Joseph. B. Casagrande uses the ecological approach in the Ecuadorian mountains to point out that among what he calls adaptive strategies is artisanal production.

After, in 1951, Sol Tax published his book *The capitalism of the cent*, where his main thesis was that the peasants of Lake Atitlán, Sololá, Guatemala, knew perfectly the laws of the market and the functioning of the economy of the society globally, others wanted to do the same by observing the artisans. In 1961, Joseph E. Grimes studied the Huichol people of Guadalupe Ocotán, Nayarit, describing their economic orientation. Later in 1977, Kjell I. Enge returned to Sol Tax's arguments to explain that a community of potters knew price fluctuation, market laws and the economic environment. In 1958, it was suggested by the Inter-American Indigenous Institute that indigenous work could be related to other productive and cultural processes, although it was rather to highlight that indigenous artisans maintained quality.

However, economic studies discovered over time both the poverty of the artisans and mechanisms of exploitation by collectors who took advantage of the social prostration of the artisan. In 1957, Papousek had denounced this situation, but



no attention had been paid to it; his study had to wait 17 years to be published. In 1972, Andrés Medina pointed out the role of crafts in the indigenous economy to avoid proletarianization and denounced the lack of support from the State in Panama. Studies to point out peasant poverty and hoarding proliferated. In 1968, Rober P. Ebersole noted "The southern artisan does not live an easy life. The average artisan is 43.6 years old and supports a family of 5.1 people. He has practiced his craft for 17 years and works a minimum of 8 hours a day and generally much more." Such a situation of economic weakness tends to persist among artisans, in a 1982 study on the potters of Chilchota, Michoacán, Jorge Joaquín demonstrates that the middlemen are the ones who impose the price.

Such studies, as well as observation, led to pointing out that crafts were a form of underemployment, this is a disguised form of worker unemployment. In this sense, studies by Anne Lise Pietri stand out, highlighting that underemployment is due to the overlap of exceptionally low-income economic activities.

In 1976, several authors introduced Marxist reflections in the economic analysis of crafts. In Guatemala, Antonio Erazo Fuentes stands out in a work that in tight pages focuses on the use value of these in production relations. In that same year, another work would gain great influence in anthropological circles: Victoria Novelo with *Artesanía y Capitalismo en México*, introduces critical aspects developed through Marxist structuralism. There he refers to the reasons that led the State to promote crafts, centering them around the search for an industrial project that would generate foreign currency, substitute imports and create complementary sources of income for rural families. As has been noted, by using the Marxist structuralism of the sixties, he affirms that the production of crafts in general is not capitalist but is inserted into the capitalist market and consumption. The fundamental point for this author is to know the process from production to consumption.

In a later work, Novelo summarizes his positions. He indicates that the opposition between industry and craftsmanship has a meaning in England to differentiate products demarcated from the industrial revolution. In Mexico, on the other hand, 4 forms of craft production are recognized: the family (sometimes mixed with agricultural work), the small workshop with workers, the individual workshop and manufacturing. In consumption there is a low sphere: popular consumption of items that have lower prices than industrial ones; and a high one: high-income consumers who "privilege aesthetics over functionality." The problem for Novelo is that craftsmanship makes up the national identity and yet the producer lives in poverty. From that point of view, he calls on artisans to overcome this contradiction, unfortunately he does not indicate the means or way to achieve it.

Novelo's work, as noted, had a lot of influence among anthropologists, thus in 1985, Luz del Carmen Vallarta Vélez, used it as a theoretical background and added that the craft production process also forms a historical-economic region thanks to the relationships between existing communities. She also makes a classification of crafts

linking the form of production carried out by Novelo with those of consumption, namely: self-consumption, internal consumption and merchandise.

#### **e. Popular response to poverty**

This approach tends to move away from the object classified as crafts and rather to focus on production that is classified as artisanal. In 1981, Gloria Garay Castillo and José A. Medina Pérez proposed abandoning the position that they described as “culturalist” that isolated the crafts producing sector from other productive sectors. The position is not totally coherent since they are committed to a definition of artisanal as “a set of activities that contribute to the transformation of some goods into new ones, through a production process characterized by the priority presence of subprocesses: typified by the predominance of ingenuity, and manual skill, on the transformative effect of machines and tools: by a predominant one attributable to living human work.” It was enough to maintain a moving historical line based on the organic composition of capital and an identification of a social sector (i.e. many people) in production.

In this last sense, they pointed out that those qualified as artisans sought to solve the problem of unemployment rather than having a logic of accumulation. Craft production is an option for the workforce due to the lack of accumulation in other sectors. The problem that must be solved is to indicate how the growth of the artisan sector should be supported.

The authors identify as artisanal production units (UPAS) those that have a low organic composition of capital in relation to the entire productive sector. From this account it is possible to classify them into individual and family, mixed and business. Although Garay and Medina affirm that the sector “offers a wide field for productive employment with minimal investment requirements and intensive use of labor that satisfies demand for final consumer goods that reach the low-income (local) market and goods that “They serve as input to certain lines of industrial production, use of ancestral technology and appropriate raw materials.” They recognize as a limitation that their growth requires a market of imperfect competition.

The same idea that it is a human choice is the subject of attention by Berta G. Ribeiro when she studies trade in the upper Negro River, Amazonas. Artisanal production is an “activity adopted to satisfy needs created by contact with the white: an acquisition of industrial goods as well as food, due to the scarcity of fishing and hunting in the region.” Furthermore, it is not only the result of a response from the artisan but in the case study it is promoted by missionaries, merchants and cooperatives (financed by missionary funds). This implies that new groups participate in the production of crafts, there is an intertribal diffusion of designs, an overproduction of sacred articles. Artisan production is preferred because it is taken as a dignified, expressive example that expresses ethnic pride over other occupations, especially

salaried work. The author thinks that something negative is the low price for the product.

In this approach, the artisan is the object of analysis, as well as his decisions. The promoting entities, which in many cases are many, appear as other social subjects that serve as a reference and eventually sanction their initiative. The unemployed and the peasant can choose between remaining idle or starting to manufacture an object, going to sell it to a middleman or selling it himself. Travel long distances to offer your products and discover new places or stay in your place of residence. From this account it follows that the study must be dynamic, be interested in subjective motivations and know how those qualified as artisans earn their living.

## **C. Crafts: an orientation**

From the review of the cultural theoretical background, several things have become clear. First, craftsmanship is a word invented around the Spanish invasion of America, which was used to designate what members of urban guilds sold in the market. It is worth remembering at this point that there is agreement among linguists that the sign is arbitrary. "The principle of the arbitrary is not challenged by anyone," says Saussure. From this account, the speaking community has been providing content to that sign. In other words, craftsmanship has not meant the same thing in the 16th century and in the 20th. In this sense, the criterion of identifying as crafts the products of processes with a low organic composition of capital is currently used compared to the entire productive sector.

Second, one can easily agree that the market can encompass all possible material objects. In other words, any product that occupies a place in space can be bought and sold. The characteristic of all crafts is that it is the object of purchase and sale.

Someone may argue that a person can make an instrument at home that only serves the manufacturer himself until it breaks or becomes useless and that he considers it a self-consumption craft since it never enters the sale. Such a criterion goes beyond the initial meaning of the concept since it was applied to objects on the market. If we accepted that exception, what would happen to the manual work that children do? What would happen to the notebooks that everyone makes? In other words, the study of self-consumption crafts would mean knowing everything that is done in homes as a field of study, which makes research work very difficult.

One could reply by saying that many human communities located in remote places do not know the market and produce useful items. In that case we would have to point out that their products are not part of the study of crafts and that they only acquire that character when they enter the market. Thus, for example, the feather

necklaces that OCEPA sells in Ecuador made by groups that inhabit the Amazon are handicrafts due to the sales promotion to which they are subject, while they are used as necklaces in the jungle, they are not. It would be very extravagant for a museum to classify preclassic Mayan pieces as handicrafts (at that time there was no market, and the others when there was).

Third, in the same sense, crafts as merchandise are subject to being reduced to an exchange value, although as is the case with the rest of these, the realization of each one is subject to a multitude of factors, both objective ("the so-called laws of market") and subjective (i.e. the idiosyncrasy of the buyer).

Finally, in the previous lines it has been shown how a group of officials, intellectuals and the public have been developing various criteria on the group of merchandise that they designate as crafts. In the research, the criterion that the popular initiative when entering the business was the important point to be studied must be privileged.