The Canonization of the Artisan Around 1900

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Abstract
Around 1900 the artisan became a national symbol throughout Europe. While the peasant had been lionized ever since the Romantic era, the craft guilds were denigrated as remnants of feudalism. This changed with the Arts and Crafts movement. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the artisan began to appear as a representative of the nation at international exhibitions, which focused increasingly on vernacular arts and traditions. In this way, craft products became a part of the national heritage, while artisans were cherished as sources of national authenticity. In the early twentieth century, traditional crafts were increasingly appreciated by artists, collectors and consumers, and many of their most extraordinary products were seen as embodying the nation's *Volksgeist* or folk-spirit.

Keywords: artisan; national symbol; Europe; belle époque; interwar era

In 1934, one year after the Nazis came to power, the German city of Düsseldorf took the initiative in organizing a grandiose exhibition thematizing the "new era in the new Reich," which would open its doors in 1937. The idea was to promote the collaboration between artists, manufacturers and artisans in order to ensure the competitiveness of German products on the international market. The exhibition would combine a model housing settlement and a garden display with an arts and crafts exhibition. Although traditional crafts were in clear decline, each region had to provide its own "typical" artisanal workshop.[1]

1 Schäfers, *Schaffendes Volk,* pp. 61–79.

Brolsma et al. *Networks, Narratives and Nations. Transcultural Approaches to Cultural Nationalism in Modern Europe and Beyond.* Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2022.
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This Nazi exhibition is a particularly clear example of how an idealized rural world could be made to function as a model for contemporary society: settlements in which peasants and artisans constituted a community rooted in the soil of the homeland where class struggle did not exist. What was most surprising was that a small-scale economy, where artisanal labour dominated and each family had a barn and vegetable garden, was considered a realistic solution in times of economic crisis. This idealization of the rural world and its artisanal traditions as the essence of the nation was not particular to the Nazis but could also be found in other countries and under a great diversity of political regimes.[2] Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the artisan has personified the identity and traditional values of the nation. So the question is: how can this idealization of the artisan as the embodiment of the nation be explained?

Hitherto, historians have paid little attention to the nationalistic lionization of the craftsman. In socio-economic histories, artisans have primarily been seen as a residue of the past.[3] The growing interest of artists and intellectuals in traditional crafts has, however, been studied by art historians and is generally regarded as a nostalgic reaction to the unstoppable march of progress, while others have focused on the role of some of these artists as forerunners of the avant-garde, presenting, for example, the Arts and Crafts movement and the German *Werkbund* as important steps towards functionalism and the Bauhaus.[4] The impact of nationalism on the decorative arts has recently started to attract attention; however, until now nearly all existing studies have focused only on specific cases.[5] As yet, there are no studies that examine how the artisan became a national symbol.[6]

Origins

The Romantic era generated a rapidly growing interest in peasant culture, particularly in oral tales such as those collected by the Grimm brothers. However, this revaluation of the traditional rural world did not extend in the same way to artisans. The guilds had been suppressed during the French Revolution as obstacles to free trade and enlightened individualism. As

2 On the artistic idealization of the rural world see also Anne Marie Thiesse's contribution to this volume.

3 Farr, *Artisans in Europe*, pp. 276–300; see also Zdatny, *Politics of Survival*.

4 Cumming and Kaplan, *Arts and Crafts*; Maciuika, *Before the Bauhaus*.

5 Gimeno-Martínez, *Design and National Identity*.

6 Storm, "Artesano como símbolo nacional."

traditional corporations, they were seen as remnants of a feudal past that had to be overcome. It was only during the second half of the nineteenth century that British intellectuals such as John Ruskin and William Morris began to esteem the medieval guilds for their supposedly harmonious cooperation between masters and apprentices. In addition, they praised the artistic quality of traditional handicrafts and advocated a closer collaboration between artists and craftsmen so as to beautify the modern world. Morris even founded a decorative arts company, which would become the nucleus of a broader, international Arts and Crafts movement.[7]

The use of traditional craft techniques was also one of the starting points of Art Nouveau, which became fashionable throughout Europe in the last years of the nineteenth century. Although artisanal traditions were generally supposed to be connected to certain territories, both Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau were cosmopolitan movements that did not place much emphasis on the national aspects of craftwork.

This was quite different in the case of regionalism, which emerged when Art Nouveau began to decline during the first decade of the twentieth century. Regionalist activists opposed the arbitrary and exaggerated forms of Art Nouveau, instead advocating that cultural expressions be rooted in the *terroir*. In the case of architecture, this meant using natural materials of local origin, fitting buildings into the landscape, taking account of local climatic conditions and using regional craftwork. In this way, buildings were explicitly rooted in the soil and connected with vernacular traditions. Artisans were now reimagined as privileged interpreters of the "popular spirit" and thus became a symbol of the *patria*, representing the regional homeland as well as the nation at large. Louis Sézille, one of the main advocates for regionalist architecture in France, stated in 1909 that architects should follow the example of traditional artisans who had perfected their own characteristic ways of building over the centuries, reaching "the mastery that surprises us so much" while creating a style that was perfectly suited for the local geographic and climatic conditions.[8]

But if artisans were the true guardians of the popular spirit, their legacy had to be protected. Therefore, museums of applied arts were created in the great capitals of Europe following the example of London, where the South Kensington Museum brought together many of the collections from the Great Exhibition of 1851. Ethnographic museums, which also focused largely on the minor arts, would follow in the 1870s with Stockholm's Nordiska

7 Cumming and Kaplan, *Arts and Crafts*.

8 Sézille, "Une maison"; Storm, *Culture of Regionalism*, pp. 73–195.

Museet as the pioneer.[9] Although these institutions aimed to improve the education of artisans, in practice they recommended copying historical ornaments that might come from any place or period. At the beginning of the twentieth century this method became increasingly problematic because it was thought that it led to artisans losing contact with their own vernacular roots. In Germany, education in the arts and crafts was thoroughly reformed; students were no longer expected to follow existing conventions and were encouraged to experiment with various materials.[10]

At the same time, companies were created in which craftsmen produced simple furniture in a neo-vernacular style designed by renowned artists and architects, such as at Karl Schmidt's German Workshops for Art in Handicrafts. Schmidt understood that artisans could only do the quality work that was needed if they were provided with a healthy environment, a decent home and a well-designed workshop. To this end, Schmidt moved his company to the outskirts of Dresden where he built Hellerau, the first garden city of the German Empire.[11] In this way, the artisan was connected with the soil and traditions of the homeland, while the company was also indirectly helping to fight off the danger of a violent internationalist revolution by the labour movement.

In France there was no similar reform of artisanal education. The consequent concern over the decline of French crafts led to an initiative to organize a major exhibition, to be held in Paris in 1916. The International Exhibition of Decorative Arts would not be inaugurated until 1925, but it was at this famous exhibition that the new Art Deco style was launched. In addition, the exhibition helped France to recover much lost ground, especially in the field of high-end artisanal products.[12]

Nevertheless, it was becoming increasingly evident that craft work was excessively expensive. Both the Arts and Crafts movement and Art Nouveau aimed to produce beautiful handicrafts for the masses, but unique handicrafts were only affordable for the affluent classes. The same was true for regionalist architecture, since incorporating artisanal work into new buildings inevitably made them more expensive. For example, in 1908, Sézille complained that building a house in a traditional Norman half-timbered style cost about a third more than a modern construction, although this did not induce him to abandon artisanal purism when offered

9 Thiesse, "Transnational Creation."
10 Maciuika, *Before the Bauhaus*, pp. 104–37.
11 Maciuika, *Before the Bauhaus*, pp. 217–48.
12 Troy, *Decorative Arts*, pp. 159–227.

cheaper ways of creating the half-timbered effect, such as using strips of wood or plaster to give the appearance of a timber frame.[13] Thus, successive attempts to reactivate the artisanal sector were never totally successful, and traditional craftwork only survived in small niches, mainly aimed at a wealthy clientele.

The Nationalization of Artisans at World Fairs

Traditional artisans could find new markets by targeting tourism and – closely related to this – international exhibitions. As a result, the link between crafts and national identity was reinforced. The Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1867 introduced national pavilions in which each country could display its cultural heritage in a characteristic building. Russia and Austria chose to showcase their diversity in several rural buildings which celebrated crafts from various parts of the two empires. The Vienna World Fair of 1873 also contained a small international village inhabited by real peasants.[14] The presence of original inhabitants in an "authentic" setting was a success, and similar ensembles quickly became a prominent feature of international exhibitions. The celebration of "authentic" life often meant representing an idealized past. For example, at the South Kensington International Health Exhibition in 1884, one enclosure was built containing twenty-five life-sized copies of historic buildings. Known as Old London, it became one of the most popular attractions.[15] This formula was quickly copied at almost all subsequent world fairs.

The "soul" of a nation could also be captured in more contemporary settings. Such an approach was first applied to exotic or colonial exhibits. For example, the 1878 Paris Universal Exposition recreated a Cairo streetscape and a *Quartier Marocain*, while the 1883 Amsterdam International Colonial and Export Exhibition featured a Javanese village. The Midway Plaisance at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 included no fewer than ten ethnographic villages, including settlements representing Lapland and Turkey, a large German village and two Irish villages. These picturesque recreations were inhabited by natives dressed in traditional costumes and engaged in typical activities. Artisans displaying their traditional manufacturing techniques occupied a privileged place. Most of these ethnographic

13 Sézille, "Reconstitution."
14 Rampley, "Peasants in Vienna."
15 Smith, "Old London."

villages were organized by commercial companies, although ethnologists often provided their services to make them as "authentic" as possible.[16]

Around the same time, nationalists began to adopt the format for representations of traditional arts and crafts, although they focused on providing a faithful representation of the national community. Thus, at the ambitious Czechoslavic Ethnographic Exhibition held in Prague in 1895, nationalist intellectuals assembled twenty-one vernacular constructions from various regions of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia to support their claim that the Czechs were a nation worthy of recognition.[17] Similar nationalist ethnographic villages were mounted in Budapest in 1896, Bucharest in 1906 and Rome in 1911. Probably the most ambitious attempt to represent rural areas in an exhibition was the first assembled for the Swiss National Exhibition in Geneva in 1896. It consisted of fifty-six vernacular constructions representing all cantons, was inhabited by over three hundred villagers in traditional costumes and was rebuilt four years later at the Universal Exhibition in Paris (Fig. 11.1).[18]

Ethnographic villages also served as inspiration for open-air museums, which generally projected a nostalgic image of an idealized rural world with peasants and artisans in traditional costumes. Again it was the Scandinavian countries that took the lead, with Stockholm's Skansen Museum created in 1891. These exhibitions and museums played a crucial role in defining national identities, transforming distinctive and sometimes eccentric pieces of furniture, costumes and vernacular buildings into integral elements of the national patrimony. The same happened with traditional crafts, especially those that were attractive and unusual. The very distinctiveness of such craftwork helped to give it the aura of national "authenticity."

Although other artistic trends would come into vogue after the First World War, such as classicism and functionalism, many international exhibitions continued to dedicate a privileged place to vernacular traditions and craftsmanship. A fascinating example can be found in the Barcelona International Exposition. The idea was to underline the modernity of Catalonia by organizing an exhibition of the electrical industries in 1917. However, the organizers were aware that in terms of strict modernity they could not compete with the United States, where San Francisco was organizing an ambitious world fair for 1915. Therefore, in the spring of 1914 the leader of the Regionalist League, Francesc Cambó, argued that the exhibition should include something that the Americans did not have: a brilliant national past. As a consequence, a new National Palace

16 Wörner, *Vergnügung und Belehrung*, pp. 72–82.
17 Filipová, "Peasants on Display."
18 Hirsh, "Swiss Art."

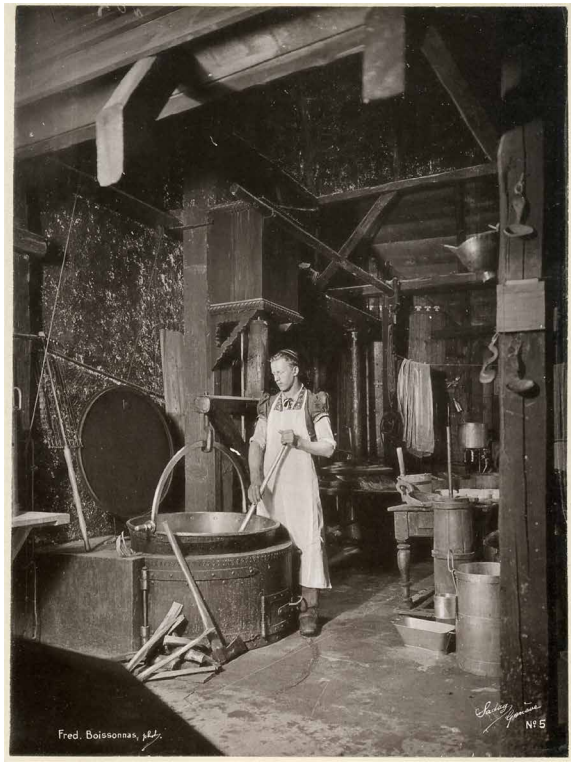

Fig. 11.1 Photograph of an artisanal cheesemaker at work at the Village Suisse at the Swiss National Exhibition in Geneva in 1896. Collection Albin Salamin. Image: NotreHistoire.ch, public domain.

was built to exhibit artistic highlights and historical artifacts from all parts of Spain. In addition, traditional crafts were to be displayed in "an exhibition of Spanish cities" that was ultimately realized in 1929 through the construction of a Spanish Village of 117 buildings from all regions of the country. Naturally, the buildings contained many cafes, restaurants and craft workshops.[19]

Epilogue

Two later exhibitions in France and Germany showed the ideological limits of this adulation of the artisan as a national symbol. The International Exhibition of Arts and Techniques of Modern Life, held in Paris in 1937, was

19 Solá-Morales, *Exposición Internacional de Barcelona*, pp. 54–61; Storm, *Culture of Regionalism*, pp. 197–205.

intended to aid in the revival of the French economy. It was decided that France would not have a large national pavilion at this exhibition but would be represented by seventeen regional pavilions in a modernized regionalist style. Each region could display its typical foods and best craft products. However, several regions complained that they no longer had any traditional craftsmen. Moreover, the organizers themselves rejected various regional submissions for lack of character. In both cases, in lieu of appropriate local talent, Parisian artists were commissioned to invent typical products that the artisans could make during the exhibition. Another challenge to the 1937 exhibition was the electoral victory, in May 1936, of the Popular Front of León Blum. The new government gave preference to trade unions and leftist youth organizations and was not interested in pavilions reflecting the cooperation of regional associations. The Popular Front was busy mobilizing the working classes and showed little interest in artisans and peasants.[20]

The French left no longer supported an idealized image of the countryside and traditional crafts by the 1930s, but what may come as more of a surprise is that the same was true for the Nazi leadership. Initially the local organizers of the 1937 Düsseldorf exhibition wanted to promote crafts and show a bucolic Germany. However, in 1935 the government appointed a new director who encouraged the participation of German industry and determined that the event would be a good opportunity to exhibit the raw materials that the Third Reich needed for its rearmament programmes. As a consequence of these changes, the exhibition ultimately emphasized the production of synthetic materials and the need for *Lebensraum*. The craftsmen disappeared entirely from the programme and were replaced by machines in full operation. Apparently the economic realities and dreams of imperial expansion were more important than the idealization of the artisan.[21]

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20 Storm, *Culture of Regionalism*, pp. 220–46.

21 Storm, *Culture of Regionalism*, pp. 262–79.

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