

The division between arts and crafts has long been the subject of debate and controversy; in most cases this distinction is preconceived, with arguments focusing on the reasoning behind the separation. As such, few would argue that modern society as a whole views these two concepts as one in the same. It is human nature to categorize within established hierarchies of value, a system which rarely allows for the concurrent occupation of a single conceptual “space”. It is this part of our very essence that drives us as a society, generally causing the elevation of art over craft in terms of academia. Despite our nature it is our duty as intellectual beings to question our own intrinsic behaviors, and ask ourselves: can we reasonably establish a distinction between these two categories?

Before beginning an analysis of the preconceptions concerning art and craft, it is important to distinguish literal from semantic characteristics of language. For our purposes let us describe literal composition as the unique lexicon, or combination of morphemes which comprises the term. Contrarily, the semantic analysis between two terms would focus on the denotative and connotative definitions. Although this process may seem trivial, one cannot take these distinctions for granted; synonyms can easily be associated despite their compositions, and likewise, can cease to be related in certain contexts.

From a syntactical point of view the English language lends itself to variety, a feature that can in some cases lead to misconceptions surrounding the interpretation of vocabulary. A definition, by its nature, conveys the meaning, or even fundamental character of an identifier; these meanings are intentionally vague in an attempt to lend a degree of flexibility to the language. One can reasonably argue then that distinctions between terms are subject to interrogation, and that a difference in character composition as defining acute meaning is not a tenable concept.

Having extinguished the use of literal composition as a means of justification, it can only be reasoned that these distinctions are matters of a semantic concern. From a denotative point of view most definitions of craft make mention of skill, regardless of application. The typical connotative meaning however, implies manual application of these skills. Quite the opposite, denotative descriptions of art tend to stress human effort of expression, with connotations indicating a deep aesthetic meaning. These tendencies are not necessarily indicative of the true nature of either term, but are instead latent representations of their cultural history. Only by analyzing the process by which these preconceptions arose can we evaluate the validity of their distinction.

Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's article, "Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts" describes the historical basis of stereotypes forged with embroidery. Some of the earliest references to pre-twelfth century British needlework speak of monks and nuns of religious houses fashioning artifacts. As with other works of their time, they glorified the predominant institutions of power. It is interesting to note that this treatment

was true of what is now referred to as “fine art”, such as painting or statues. Little distinction could be made between the concepts of art and craft in this regard.

Despite this, we cannot simply assume that the lack of distinction of this era can be related their modern counterparts in all cases. For these works the denotative meaning of art and craft was somewhat parallel; connotatively speaking, however, both works fall into a classification altogether different than their modern-day definitions. To the people of the time these pieces were elevated to a socio-religious state. An essential problem arises if we look at this considering Bullough’s *antimony of distance*, a theory by which a viewer must strive to achieve the maximum decrease in temporal distance to the work without its disappearance: the viewers of the time were emotionally involved with the work, creating an over-distanced stance. In this way viewers of these works fail to understand them as art; it is essentially impossible to relate this concept of art and craft of their time to our own. A similar problem can be seen in the case where royal or upper noble homes had their own workshops to produce custom items: these generally concerned the house or high-standing family, their interpretation inherently personal.

It is not until the Reformation that we see a shift in the structure of the concept of art and craft, into a position more comparable to our own. As embroidery production became more industrialized, demand for specific styles of the time increased. These goods were handmade and of superior quality, produced by tightly organized guilds. This transition from a religious context to one of aesthetic enjoyment and consumption allows us the ability to strike a comparison to our own society. Embroidery produced in

this manner shared features with modern day popular art, lending the notion that indeed, art and craft were of a similar standing.

However, this viewpoint is misleading; the connotations of modern day craft still existed in domestically produced embroidery works of the time. Indeed, embroidery itself was not necessarily seen under the light of an “incogent view”, whereas its relationship to the home was. In this way we can see an analogous relationship between the views on modern and medieval craft. As such, we have alleviated the possibility that an existing distinction between art and craft could depend upon the materials it was fashioned from. Another crucial point of interest during this epoch concerns the guilds’ members: most, if not all, were male. It is difficult to say from the history preceding these events whether sexual stereotyping played any role in the transition. Regardless of the roles of men and women in arts and crafts before the Reformation, the distance necessary to appreciate aesthetic art was not prevalent in society. Not until after this period do we see the emergence of the modern view of art, and concurrently the male domination of it.

Despite the hardships encountered by attempting to make a comparison to the past, it is critical not to prejudice the extent of sexual roles in these distinctions. Without further investigation, there is no reason to believe that this was no more than a coincidence spawned by unique conditions in a particular society. Thus, we move ahead in time and across societal barriers to another example described by Parker and Pollock: the issue of the viewpoint on American Navaho Indian blankets. Traditionally created by

women, these works have generally been viewed on an anthropological note. This in itself does not diminish the possibility of their consideration as meaningful art in the modern day connotative sense. Rather, their distinction as a craft has been a function of their domesticity within the Navaho society. When placed on exhibit as art in the 1970s, Ralph Pomeroy is quoted as saying:

“I am going to forget, in order to really see them, that a group of Navajo blankets are not only that. In order to consider them, as I feel they ought to be considered – as Art with a capital ‘A’ – I am going to look at them as paintings – created with dye instead of pigments, on unstretched fabric instead of canvas – by several nameless masters of abstract art.”

Parker and Pollock find Pomeroy’s maneuvers before considering the blankets art indicative of the male-oriented nature of “fine art”. In order to appreciate them, they state, he must formally destroy any notion of the female sex; the original artist has been destroyed and replaced by a typical male role, that of a “master”. It is difficult in this scenario to discern whether we should believe that this stereotyping is due to the fact that the items are created by women, or that it is simply due to the fact that they have been produced in the home, a role traditionally filled by women. Regardless of the scenario, we must be aware that the physical aspect of what was once regarded as a craft has become fine art, indicating that the difference between the two ideas is minimal, if not non-existent.

The argument for the biasing of women as the standard of classifying craft is indeed difficult to approach. However despite traditional roles, modern day female artists do exist; this in itself is a testament to the idea that a work is not considered art simply because it has been created by a male. Females are more than capable of creating meaningful, aesthetically pleasing art, if the work is created with the intention of being perceived as art. Although this does not discount the possibility that a sexual prejudice could *influence* the perception of a work as art or craft, it does prove that it does not *define* art and craft.

Despite the changing historical conceptions of art and craft it is important to notice the ever-present trend: when concerning modern day connotations of art and craft, distinctions have always existed in human society. As stated previously, it is human nature to create discriminations in cultural taste and value. Decomposed, a meaningful difference between the materials of the two forms cannot be discerned. Additionally, the nature of their syntactic differentiation is not indicative of their separate meaning. Analysis from the semantic point of view yields both a parallel denotative meaning yet differing connotative meaning. This difference was shown to be the product of cultural viewpoints throughout history concerning the purpose of the work upon its creation. Intellectually, one can reason the transition of the status of a work created for domestic use to that of one created for a more “artistically” meaningful or aesthetic enjoyable context. Ultimately, the distinction of art and craft can be seen as a tenable separation derived from the ambitions of the artist; it is both natural and acceptable for an audience to perceive a work as the product of its artist’s intentions for consumption.