

**“Appreciation for and the Emotional Response We Have Toward Handmade Goods in a  
Technological Era”**

An Honors Thesis

by

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2018

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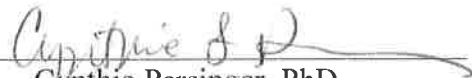
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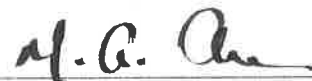
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*Keywords: handcrafted, appreciation, emotional response*

## Abstract

In this paper, I explore a topic about which I am passionate: handmade goods. The focus started out as being just about greeting cards, but now the idea has expanded further into the entire handmade industry. Handmade cards, pins, buttons, etc. make us stop and think and enjoy the simple things from life. The majority of us grouped in the millennial age range have grown up in an era where we rely on technology more than hands-on experiences. In an era of technology, people have learned to “stop and smell the roses” of the handmade trend that continues to be a part of our lives. Sites such as Etsy, Amazon Handmade, and even individual small business sites would not be this successful if people were not interested in this phenomenon. The main focus of my research has become looking at the appreciation and emotional response that people, as a whole, have during this era of technology where our eyes are trained to barely leave a screen. Walter Benjamin’s (1968) article on the age of mechanical reproduction talks about the loss of aura and authenticity because of the use of machinery, and his content ties into what I am trying to talk about here. In this paper I ultimately argue that some people today are seeking out tactile goods that have been crafted by an individual person because of the humanistic traits these objects possess which helps us to understand on a deeper level their uniqueness and authenticity. Through the use of case studies and theorist’s opinions, I have built up my argument that handmade goods are making a comeback, but also an impact on our lives where technology has lacked.

Appreciation for & the Emotional Response We Have  
Toward Handmade Goods in a Technological Era

Technology has become such a massive part of our everyday lives, and sometimes I wish it was not. We have become slaves to our screens of varying sizes, whether it is a television, laptop, tablet, or phone; we all rely on them in our day to day experiences. The majority of people born in the millennial era started life with minimal technological interferences. Television shows were the main brain-numbing outlets of the time because in the 90s, Wi-Fi was not yet a household staple. In the 22 years I have been alive, I have seen technology skyrocket to new heights, and it is truly amazing to see the advances people have made across the industry. We went from waiting for painfully slow dial-up internet, so we could “surf the web” to now having it on at all times with Wi-Fi capabilities and to access any source of information in seconds. If it takes longer, our patience usually wears thin. Over my lifetime, I have seen people adapt to being so reliant on their phones and devices that I sometimes wonder if people try to enjoy the life around them anymore or just the virtual one they create online.

Social media may have been helpful in linking us to old friends who moved away or people we have not seen in years, but the amount of advertising that is bombarding people using those platforms is astounding. People flood ‘likes’ to beautiful photographs and nowadays with how advanced our cell phone’s cameras are, anyone can be a “photographer” and shoot images for media content, but that is what people look for. They do not look for what is real; they are trained to look for the pretty things that catch their eyes and hold their attention. They desire all the little perfect details. Why are some people so fixated on these “perfect lifestyles” when they know no one is perfect? It’s

because media has gotten stronger by using the internet and social media to bombard everyone with their trends and agendas. Social media is readily accessible by anyone in the world with a cell phone, tablet, or a computer and the more viral a post becomes, the more people are seeing it, recognizing it, and wanting that or to be it.

Thankfully, there is some good that comes from using social media, and that good is how it helps empower small businesses and crafters. Before, it was much harder to get your name out there as a creator of something handmade or even as a designer, but now with the use of social media, if you know how to work the system in your favor, get the right followers to promote you, you too can be just as popular as the celebrities in Hollywood. This exposure is a huge benefit for the Indie art industry to help rising creators get established. What is it about their done-by-hand, letterpress cards and their macramé plant holders, or their hand thrown ashtray that gets us to purchase them and want them? Most have seen the mass production industry flourish and still stock the never-ending retail superpowers of our world, but what I have started to realize is that people miss certain values that are put into something crafted by hand.

Walter Benjamin was a philosopher born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who addressed something of the sort during the modern era. In his essay; *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, first published in German in 1935, he argued that these new mechanical technologies caused the things they produce to lose their sense of authenticity, their auras are diminishing or we only see them in a work of art. Benjamin (1968) states; "...the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence" (p. 4). By making something with a machine and being totally mass

produced, you lose that unique and authentic feel that one finds when experiencing something made by another human. Its mechanical perfection is actually lacking because it's missing the aura that is brought about through a human's touch. In the early times of mass production, Benjamin noticed a change in how art was viewed. When discussing the value of film, Benjamin (1968) argued that "The mass is a matrix from which all traditional behavior toward works of art issues today in a new form. Quantity has been transmuted into quality" (p. 17). At the time, Benjamin was valuing the potential of quantity, especially reaching a mass audience. He was viewing the advances during modern times where industrialization and factories were new and increasing.

However, today I want to suggest that is in fact the opposite. In the age of technological reproduction, quality is not seen as a high quantity, but rather a unique, individual item that one thinks is true to them. It may have bumps or ridges in it, but it is those human qualities that some people are looking for again. Similarly, Benjamin (1968) described the differences between concentration and distraction; he stated that "... A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it...In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art" (p. 18). During our current heightened technological era, we experience something like this. Technology has become our distraction from the real world and life around us, but when we look up from those screens and experience something created by an artist or craftsman, we are encouraged to concentrate on that. Some people want to know about the creator, their other pieces, and what speaks to us on that unique level of connection. There are so many different elements that have come into play with how people are subconsciously revolting against manufactured goods and technology. Some people are seeking out tactile goods that have been produced by a

person because of the humanistic traits they possess which helps us to understand on a deeper level their uniqueness and authenticity.

### **History of the Handcrafted**

It is hard to directly pin-point one bit of history and say it is the start of the handcrafted industry, since there are so many components to it. Letterpress, enamel pin creation, greeting cards, and goods made from other materials like clay and leather, are just a few of the handmade goods that make up the thousands of Etsy shops, brick & mortars, and online stores we have access to now. People are not limited to what they create or their components, and that is what really makes this industry so unique. It is not a corporate or industrialized thing; it is handmade, and the creator puts an immense amount of effort and love into what they are creating. At this point, I am sure many of these creatives could find a retailer or factory to mass produce their product, but they do not want that because it loses its story and becomes just another boring product you could buy at a TJ Maxx or Walmart. It loses the effort, the love, and distinctiveness as soon as it becomes something that runs off a conveyor belt.

### **Technology Takedown & Resurrecting the Handcrafted Industry**

But how has the handcrafted movement made such a noticeable comeback in the past few years? In the late 80s to the early 90s, computers started to flood into schools, and technology instantly started taking off, kicking back the crafters because these intelligent machines were the move of the future. Who cared how many days it took you to position and set every word and letter in the sentence you stamped onto that piece of paper? Letterpress was slow and tedious. You could write that same sentence, and have it printed through an inkjet printer in a matter of minutes. Cooper, Gridneff, and Haslam



(2014) explain that in 1983, the universities found in the UK struggled to determine whether or not to keep their letterpresses with the invention of the Mac computer. The western world as a whole decided to dispose of most if not all of their presses thinking that they would be obsolete in a short amount of time with the invention of these computers (Cooper et al., 2014, p. 55). The convenience of this new technology has taken over and most are now engulfed daily, surrounded by technology everywhere we look. Whether it is our laptop, cell phone, television, or anything else that exists with the RGB screen, our eyes are bound to be glued to it. Benjamin (1968) makes the point: “Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception...” (p. 19). We are continuing to live in this distracting era that is driven by technology so when something tactile gets us to look up, we become more interested and immersed in it.

However, with that level of convenience and accessibility, the things we can produce with the few clicks of our keys and a send to the printer are so lifeless, or in Benjamin’s terms, lacking an aura. Anything can be printed from a computer nowadays and the fact that it is done so easily and quickly has made some people aware of how stale and unappealing these things are. Whether it is the computer we are working with or the paper it comes out on, there is more of a struggle to breathe life into the work we create this way. As the post-industrial world knows how to use a computer to some extent and create or print things to use. What emotion or genuine feeling does that give off? Nothing, it is lifeless unless you are one of the creative minded people of the world that knows how to take that lifeless print out and make it speak to someone.

And that is where the crafts industry comes back into play. Many people today are already fed up with the lack of emotion found on screens. Most people are conditioned to glaze over the content we view because no matter how crazy-amazing it is, the next thing will always be better. Nothing tangible or emotional; it is flat, it is an image and we cannot enjoy it like we can when we go somewhere and experience it. Marshall McLuhan's famous statement: "The medium is the message" really pertains to this. Some have started to miss the tangible when so many are sucked into their screens and not experiencing real life. As I talked about before with Benjamin's arguments (1968), we experience distractions and concentrations. Technology has proven to be a total distraction and we absorb what we are experiencing whereas handmade, tactile goods have become something we concentrate on and become immersed in (Benjamin, 1968, p. 18). People have begun to realize this and have reached out to different creators who can be found all over the world in search of tangible goods that hold that emotion, soul, and life that some people look for. It is one thing to own things, but it is another to have something that holds meaning to the creator and even better if it holds meaning to you. Some like to know the story of how something came to be; it makes us want it that much more knowing that a human took the time to create something with their two hands for another human to use and enjoy. This is a disconnect with technology and possibly something that will never be achieved. Handcrafted items can give us a story and deepen our appreciation for it and also allows us to see its unique being, whereas technology keeps it as a flat, lifeless image that we cannot experience on a further level. Most people might be absorbed in technology and the things it has shown us, but really it is just a distraction to the tactile objects that people are creating for us to appreciate.

### **The Story Behind the Saucer**

Arguably, human beings enjoy accumulating things. Whether it is tchotchkes that sit and collect dust on a shelf or something more usable like a ceramic mug, if it has a story that is important to us, we are more than likely to keep it for years to come. People like things for a lot of reasons, whether it's the story, the effort and time poured into creating it, the person who gave it to us, the personality the piece holds, or if we attach it to some sort of style we believe encompasses us as a person. There are many reasons regarding why people want to keep and hold onto things, even though it varies from person to person. It mainly comes back to the aura and authentic feelings one gets from experiencing a handmade good done by another person and not a machine. Benjamin explains; "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (p. 3). If something is not original and unique, it will lack the authentic feeling that Benjamin is talking about. Aesthetics will always play a role, but if someone knows the amount of time and effort someone put into creating it, or if a loved one sought this item out for months for you, they are more likely to hold that object more near and dear to them.

### **Sincere Ceramics: We Design Things for a Reason**

In 2009, a case study was conducted to look at meaningful interactions and durability of our emotions kept in mind in the creation of ceramic wares (Lacey, 2009, p. 87). Lacey received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to conduct this case study; "In a world saturated with products – many of which are used briefly and then thrown away – this project aims at producing 'fewer better things', for example ceramic objects which transcend the fast-moving home-ware trends and remain loved and

relevant over extended time” (p. 87). Not only did she want to create pieces that could withstand the trends and time, she wanted to create pieces that people would tie their emotions to and connect with on that level. With pottery being a very different craft field, like all of the crafts are, they are able to wield clay into different shapes and structures for their customers to experience. If they pay attention to the small details like leaving a part of their mug intentionally unglazed or making hand-carved designs into the surface, people take note of those nuances and explore the object more. It gets the potential customer to explore the creator’s work on a deeper level and build on that experience. These little finite details get the buyer to come back and remember those little details anytime they go to use that ceramic piece, and that is a part of what handmade crafters depend on. Building that experience, story, or relationship with the inanimate object for the customer is what the craftsman has created (Lacey, 2009, p. 89).

Almost everyone you meet has a favorite ceramic mug. If you have not received a good mug as a gift or bought one for yourself, you are certainly missing out. People pick them like they pick cards; they encompass that person they are buying it for. They like the color, look, weight, etc. of that mug. Mugs have been proven to be very customizable and not just ceramic ones, but ones made out of plastic, steel, and other materials to create something that we fall in love with having. I personally have two favorites, one that is a plastic travel mug and one that is a typical mass-produced ceramic mug. I like them though for what is on them visually, but others want that mug to be exciting visually and be crafted by someone’s hands. A machine is not going to recognize different tiny details that a potter is going to know from years of practice. A machine will only produce what it is told to create; it does not have a creative freedom like a potter

does. That potter is able to make design decisions to make his buyers question or appreciate a small detail that we know a machine could not produce. Benjamin's point on authenticity explains: "The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated" (p. 4). It is that humanistic quality we get when someone creates it by their own two hands and creates it in a certain way to trigger a response within us. Most people understand that it is not a flaw they are experiencing, but something that has made that item unique to them and their experience with it.

Throughout the case study, Lacey created three different mugs that interact with the customers and their emotions in distinctive ways. The one that stood out the most was known as the Duo espresso set. The handle on these cups are placed in different locations on each cup, including being placed off center. The goal is for the customer to grow accustomed to the mug of their choosing for their handle placement. The reason for all of this is so that the buyers can realize the intention and connect with the potter's effort and passion being put into these mugs. A couple had purchased one of the Duo espresso sets and their statement really rung true in Lacey's (2009) study;

...I use the 90-degree angled handle, as it feels more practical, more right. He has chosen the 45-degree angled handle, he's more experiment and likes the more obscure objects, but he insists his one is right one. Some mornings we joke about swapping mugs, but it never happens. (p. 92)

That comment made by a buyer was what really hit home the idea of emotional durability in this study. They chose which mug is the "right one" based on their own personalities. They both acknowledge the qualities of the mugs that are different than regular, run-of-

the-mill mugs, and that is what they like about them. They do not want to try each other's mugs; they like their mugs and have claimed that personal preference of them. These mugs have created an experience and story for this couple thanks to such a minuscule detail of the placement of handles, yet the potter paid attention to that detail so that his buyers could experience that attachment.

### **Preserve the Perfection**

Social media platforms, like Instagram especially, have most people trained to seek perfection and beauty in anything one encounters. So, stores, restaurants, cafes, etc. are focusing on that aspect and making sure their store is an aesthetic experience just like Instagram. This goal to reach perfection is seen through tangibles as well as technological sources. Although some people seek out and look forward to finding aesthetically beautiful objects, foods, etc. there is a flaw with this. When the object is something that will deteriorate with use, the beauty of the item will be destroyed, therefore making us sad and the payoff being less bountiful than if it was an object not ruined with use. As stated in the case study done by Fitzsimons, Morales, Samper, and Wu (2017) we find that people tie high aesthetics to high effort. With that being said, people are less likely to use something or consume the aesthetic object if they understand doing so will damage it. The consumer feels as though they have actually destroyed the effort someone has put into creating that consumable, and it affects the person negatively (Fitzsimons et al., 2017, p. 652). Some people want to preserve the beauty of things that they encounter in life. Therefore, some people are less inclined to enjoy something that they think they will ruin with use since it seems that the creator took a lot of time to construct it.

### **Too Good to Eat**

But as Fitzsimons et al. (2017) explained before, some lose sight of the enjoyment and happiness they have when experiencing these objects if they know that using them will ruin them (Fitzsimons et al., 2017, p. 654). Stores like Target and Whole Foods capitalize on the fact that people seek beautiful tangible items, even if they are food and we will destroy their beauty. Some people think quickly when shopping for food. Most look for the best price, the type of food they like, or the food that catches their eye. Target and Whole Foods are both at higher price points than stores like Walmart or Aldis, but they focus on the aesthetic factor and create even off brands that are visually attractive so that their customers feel inclined to purchase them. According to Fitzsimons et al. (2017),

...marketers invest a lot of resources in product aesthetics and design. These efforts are not unfounded – the design and aesthetics of products and services are often considered important predictors of marketing and sales success (Bloch 1995) and are relied upon to evaluate the myriad of product offerings in the marketplace. (p. 651)

It may cost their customers more to purchase it, but the customers are more inclined to do so because of that factor. Customers do not consider the fact that eating or using the item purchased is going to ruin the aesthetic value that they had bought it for in the first place.

The sentimentalism and emotional response some people get when they gravitate toward beautiful things does not normally come out until they see something that is more long-lasting than food. Chefs are capable of creating stunning dishes for us to consume, but meals do not always have such an impact on us as real items that we can take home

and showcase. Fitzsimons et al. (2017) explains this through their research when people are given the option to eat one of two cupcakes. One is intricately decorated while the other is very simple and plain. Their research shows that people are more likely to eat the less beautiful one so that they do not destroy the beauty of the other. The only way they might consider consuming it would be if the consumer was convinced that it took little effort to create the beautiful cupcake or if that person does not easily appreciate one's effort (Fitzsimons et al., 2017, p. 654). Meals are not normally able to build a story for the customers as objects do. They might build a story through the atmosphere and experience the customers have there, but not usually something that they will remember long past the visit.

Some people only like to keep things that have a story or some sort of sentimental value to their lives. The same goes for handcrafted items. People want them for the passion poured into them, but also the worth that they hold it to. It may cost more than something that is stamped *Made in China*, but people are more willing to shell out the few extra dollars to know that object came from someone's hard work and ideas to be bought and shared in another's home.

### **For the Love of Goods**

Anyone is capable of creating anything, if they have the creativity, passion, mindset, knowledge, tools... well you get the idea. It takes a lot for someone to create something by hand for others to purchase and enjoy. We can easily purchase things from China at big corporate stores, or we can delve into small stores owned by a family that carry only local artisan works of diverse backgrounds. Are there downfalls to this? The prices are sometimes astronomically high since the item could be one-of-a-kind, so the



price will not matter. Some people want to support a person who poured their passion into creating something with their skill and talent, where they have found their niche in the craftsman collective. Even if that person has not poured every ounce of their life into their craft, it is uplifting to see someone explore a passion or a hobby and make something of it so that others can enjoy what they do. And that is part of the story that the crafter creates for his customers to experience. The crafter's motivation, dedication, and passion in their work can help to attract some people to their home-made goods. Some people appreciate that; they appreciate the humanist characteristics of these tangible objects. They are works of art in themselves, yet at prices everyday people can enjoy along with a loving story built by the creator.

And there is not one certain area that a craftsman must work in. Social media may be encouraging the fetishization of the impossibly perfect, but this is shaped through the mediums of digital technologies. As I have mentioned earlier, there is no set area a creator must work in to get recognized. We have experienced potters, leather-workers, jewelers, screen printers, letterpress magicians, calligraphers, enamel pin constructors, quilters and knitting, the list just goes on. Each individual creator experiences their field of choice in different ways and brings unique concepts to their area of expertise. Benjamin (1968) explains that; "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (p. 3). Without that creative variation, I genuinely doubt these craft industries would be as successful as they are now. There is a reason why people go to these mom & pop shops to purchase unique sets of mugs with no two that look alike other than in color palette and size instead of a department store to pick up a perfectly matched set and that reason is that they want something unique, something authentic that

they connected with and picked out. Every customer has their own personal preference of how they want to fill their life and surroundings. We are entitled to our own decisions and styles just as the creators of the items we purchase. Sometimes the appearance is not the primary attraction to an object, but rather the history of the item or the story of how it was acquired. Many people like their items to have meaning or significance or to somehow provide a familiarity to them. Not every item fulfills these needs, and sadly some become contributions to the substantial amount of landfills and garbage we have. (Since we throw out 4.4 pounds of trash a day...yay humans (Aughenbaugh, 2014). But other objects that hold meaning tend to be passed down through the generations and have that sentimental story attached to them. People enjoy feeling connected to family or friends by handing something down with a story and emotion attached to it. When you see it, it reminds you of a day, a story, or experience that you can cherish forever.

### **Mail That's Made to Stay: The Greeting Card**

Believe it or not, greeting cards in their earliest form have been around since 1846, but what we know to be greeting cards today came about a little later in the year 1910 by a creator named Joyce Hall. At the young age of 18, he began selling postcards out of a shoebox. Five years from then he started into greeting cards when a fire had destroyed his inventory, he decided it was time to purchase his own presses and create his own. One of the most recognizable actions Hall did was licensing Disney characters for his cards just a mere four years after the first Disney film was released (Suddath, 2014, p. 84). Hallmark is still a family-owned company, even though it now employs over 11,000 employees to create cards, work in their stores, etc. Even in our current technological era,

people love and enjoy greeting cards and the different personalities they bring to the table without having to create it themselves (Suddath, 2014, p. 85).

### **Lovely Letterpress: Hours of Work Well Spent**

A craft that is being brought back to life in recent years is letterpress. People in the creative industry understand, respect, and love the work done on a letterpress, but few know actually how to create or work one. As stated before, many schools that had access to these presses had done away with them when technology was on the rise, so they are not easily accessible as they were before. But on top of that, letterpress and learning to use a press teaches a craftsman a whole new realm of trial and error, problem solving, etc. to help them grow their wheel house of skills, but also appreciation for the style of work and the time it takes to get something right. Cooper & Gridneff (2010) have previously stated that processes such as letterpress should be explored beyond the value of a teaching tool, stating that letterpress is valuable because of the transferable skills it can equip students with, such as an appreciation of physical space and the slower speed of work fostering reflection through design (Cooper & Gridneff, 2014, p. 56).

Certainly, letterpress is not a skill necessary for graphic designers, but we do not want to limit people and require them to learn this or any craft for that matter. With that being said, it does humble some and helps them to understand on a deeper level the work that goes into it. "...it made us more conscious designers. You have to make choices rather than working with defaults on the computer'. The reality of making the artifact, not a representation of the artifact" (Cooper & Gridneff, 2010, p. 68). It gets them to understand how much effort is put into creating something of this caliber because it is done by hand, one at a time normally. And if your layout is off or you misspell a word,

you cannot just hit a backspace on your keyboard and fix it. The creator has to go in, realign the letters on the press and correct any other errors such as spacing before trying to print again. The letterpress allows for so many errors to occur, but it allows you to grow an understanding for the craft and a respect for it, even if it is not your style of work. “All of the students took pleasure from the notion that letterpress authorship is a holistic activity and constitutes an education model that integrates design craft and production” (Cooper & Gridneff, 2010, p. 68). People, not just students enjoy the engagement one experiences when crafting something, it does not have to be just letterpress for that feeling of authorship to be felt.

### **Hand-Set & Hands Full: People are Hooked**

It is no lie when we say that letterpress might have tricked many into believing it was a trade that died off, but small businesses, craft-hungry crowds, and now even big-name companies want in on it again. In reality though, so many of us are already fed up with staring at a screen for hours on end, it is nice for graphic designers to have something to take a break to enjoy and explore the process. One designer by the name of Donatella Madrigal is finding that love away from her screen and finding it on the press. She explains; “It’s an excuse to get down and dirty and to get away from the computer, and I’m always learning from the paper” (Green, 2012, p. 60). Even though the market for luxury items saw a drop in 2008, letterpress held strong and has increased in popularity. Even in 2012, Etsy housed over 22,000 letter pressed goods on their site. Another successful printer, Kimberly Austin, makes up the one woman show of Austin Press in San Francisco. She quit her regular job to go full time letter pressing with her three presses in her warehouse. She was lucky enough to build a connection with high-

end women's clothing chain, Anthropologie, and sell her cards through them as well as through her own online shop. With that being said, she was able to make roughly \$250,000 in 2011 with her letterpress goods (Green, 2012, p. 61). People crave the feeling that we notice when we touch a letter-pressed piece of paper. It is a thick stock, but the press indents the letters, shapes, or images onto it with light or hard touches of the roll. And we notice it because we feel it, we see the indentation on the surface. We as the patrons to this craft enjoy seeing what the craftsman chose to do with that card or poster that they created. Whether it is bold and in your face, or soft and dainty, letterpress has many styles just like your typical cards do, but they take on a whole new breath with their abilities to change the dimension and depth of the card.

### **The Maker's Mark Makes a Difference**

It really is the effort, time, and passion that the creator puts into the work that makes their goods unique and people interested. Yes, mass-produced items can look genuine and seem to have that passion put into it, but they do not. You get a much more humanistic and genuine feeling when you hold something crafted by another person. Handmade crafters build that story throughout their lifetime, their style, their voice that shows through in their work. And if they are like most out in the industry, not only do they want their work to stand out in the crowd of creators, they also want to leave a lasting and appreciative impression on their buyers. Benjamin (1968) argues that; "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" (p. 3). Once the crafter has that appreciation and understanding of their

trade, they are able to pass that emotion through their work and onto their audience through the story, the history that they have built for their crafted goods.

### **It's the Little Things**

Customers can review their purchases on the websites in which they purchase from, and the majority of them like to note and acknowledge the effort and details the creator puts into just packaging their order. Details like; signing their work, a hand written thank-you note, packaging it to ship to the safest extent, and even making the packaging itself look beautiful are some of the many details buyers pay attention to when a seller goes out of their way to do that. It shows the compassion and value they carry in their work which is then passed to their buyer.

The purchase becomes not only a story, but an experience and that starts the spark of where it goes from there in the buyer's hands. Tying back to Benjamin (1968);

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. (p. 4)

Benjamin understood that if something did not hold that authenticity, people would be less inclined to give that item a chance. We want to see the story that one object can hold, it will not have much of a story or history if it comes off of a conveyor belt. And that is what people are looking for. People in this day and age like to stop and smell the roses when they are given the opportunity to do so. Not always are we given the chance, but

the little details of things tend to catch our eyes, nowadays when they are not glued to a screen. The people that seek to make these purchases from crafters tend to appreciate these fine details and understand that the creator took the time and effort to do that because they care about those little things, but it makes us understand more how much of what that person created means to them and in turn, hopes to pass that onto to their buyer.

A more realistic situation that everyday people encounter would be receiving a letter in the mail with your name and address written by hand on the front or having a letter of some sort inside but seeing that they signed their name in pen. People can distinguish pen ink, from an ink stamp, and from a printer's ink. When someone takes the time to sign their name with their ballpoint pen on a letter printed off of a machine that probably printed thousands of copies, it is nice to know someone took the time to consider that glimpse of a genuine feeling we receive as customers that they signed their name personally. It is a personal touch that puts life back into something that lacks it, it shows that they care far more than someone who just prints their name in a chosen font off the computer.

### **Mesmerizing Mom & Pop Shops**

E-cards were never something that caught on in the card industry. Studies have shown that e-cards make up 2-3% of the greeting card market which is nothing. (Veiders, 2013) With that being said, Hallmark and American Greetings are not the only card providers that are gaining all the revenue. Local stores in small or trendy neighborhoods tend to pop up more recently, housing local artisans works of all kinds that the owners are interested in carrying. A local example is a shop called Wildcard located in the Lawrenceville neighborhood of Pittsburgh. This store has established quite the name for

itself here in Pittsburgh and has such a following that you must go through basically an interview process to get your work accepted into their store. But they are not the only ones that do this, they want to curate their store to the style that their patrons gravitate towards, the style that they personally want to see, or even have not seen before and want to bring into their shop. Wildcard has been around since 2009 and thriving even to today. Consumers miss and want to support the small businesses nowadays, we are not interested in supporting the big corporations any longer, we want to see the small guys thrive.

### **Online Artisans: When Technology & Handmade Collide**

With how quickly technology and the use of the internet has taken over, crafters had to develop and work with it in order to stay relevant. Etsy, Amazon Handmade, and personal sites linked through social media accounts have become the main ways local artisans get their name out there and build their name. Etsy was started in 2005 by three friends named: Rob Kalin, Chris Maguire, and Haim Schoppik in their Brooklyn apartment. They wanted to create a platform that allowed those crafters to sell their goods without being charged heavily to do so (Reader, 2015). And since their initial launch, they have done nothing, but grow every year to an all-time high. Within two years of being open for business, they had acquired roughly 450,000 sellers and over \$26 million in sales. Fast forward to 2015, Etsy has over 54 million members and have gone over the billion mark in sales (Reader, 2015). But along with those great numbers in 2015 came a new and daunting contender.

Amazon had decided to launch Handmade at Amazon in October of that year to compete. And that is no surprise seeing as though they have become one of the top online



sellers for the decade. With Amazon's 2-day shipping, good prices, and thousands of reviews on products, it is no wonder so many people have turned to this online superstore over the brick and mortars. Right off the bat, Amazon had planned to have more than 80,000 items to showcase in the Handmade launch from sellers all over the world. Etsy ran into backlash from many of their crafters and artisans when they released the manufacturers being allowed to sell on what was supposed to be a crafter's paradise. With that being done, many looked for a second option and pursued being a seller for Amazon instead (Weise, 2015). And unlike Etsy, Amazon had actually found a lot of the crafters on their own through craft fairs, websites, and mom & pop shops. To be included in their handmade sellers, it is usually a four-week process of them getting to know you, your work, and how you get to the end result (Weise, 2015). People search and purchase handmade things for a reason, if they did not want something handmade, they would not go looking for it.

### **Manufacturers Beware: Etsy Sellers Don't Want You Here**

After a couple changes in command at Etsy, 2013 had rolled around and the new CEO had decided to allow manufactured goods also to be sold on their site. Many of the small business owners that used this platform as a way to get their names out there hated this, but they had nowhere else to go until 2015 with the start of Handmade at Amazon (Reader, 2015). Even with all of that being said, small businesses housed on Etsy knew of the blogs and backlash sellers got if anyone caught wind of them having extra workers or worse, actually using a manufacturer instead of crafting their goods themselves. Etsy was meant to be somewhere where a craftsman or artisan could sell original work without having access to their own or other mom & pop shops, they did not want to see it get

doused in manufactured goods, it would take away from their handmade wares and the whole point of this site was to help better the small guys. Wolverson (2013) said;

These days, craftsmanship isn't just about the quality of work. It's about selling a lifestyle as carefully calibrated as any Ralph Lauren scene of equestrian bliss. The collision between artisanal purity and capitalist ambition is playing out among thousands of amateur carpenters, potters, and condiment makers who have turned household arts and hobbies into thriving ventures.

But he is right in saying that. People want to experience that story of how the product you create came to be. It has to have a story with whimsical soft music playing in the background of the homepage video; they want to feel your emotion throughout your work. Arguably, you do not get the same kind of emotion or story with a manufactured object, or at least not the same kind of emotion or story. It is just like the piece of paper you type words onto that come out of your printer, it is lifeless, it is effortless, and people just settle for those types of things. Back to Benjamin (1968), he understood that these emotional experiences we have are built by an item's history and what makes it authentic, but with those comes its aura. When talking about two different times in history, Greeks viewed a statue of Venus differently than the clerics of the Middle Ages. Benjamin (1968) explains; "Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura...for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility" (p. 6). During the modern era, we had lost track of the craft movement and we pushed into the industrialization that was now available to us. However, now we are seeing the craft push

back and customers are all about it. We do not want to experience art or crafts that were mass produced. We want to experience something unique, feel its aura that radiates off of it so we can really truly understand where it came from and the work someone put into it.

By far one of the biggest upsets involving manufactured goods in Etsy history was by a store called Ecologica Malibu. It was owned by a thirty-one year old by the name of Mariana Schecter who was a Brazilian designer who built eco-friendly furniture using reclaimed nautical wood that she sold from her California studio. She did have a brick-and-mortar store running in California first, but decided to list a few things on Etsy as well. Quickly, her items were flying off the electronic shelves of Etsy and she was getting contacted by big name companies like Google and ordering large quantities of her items. With all of this rapid rise to fame, other sellers already disgruntled by Etsy changing their rules for manufacturers, started to question her business if she was completing it all on her own. An Etsy critic caught wind of this and decided to do some digging of her own and found that not only were Schecter's items listed on Overstock.com, but also a wholesaler site as well. Schecter was instantly accused by thousands of distributing mass-produced furniture. From the accusations, it only got worse with hate mail, petitions, and more to the point that Schecter closed her Etsy store and moved. The only thing she explained was that when she opened her shop through Etsy, she did not completely understand the concept of it. She understood that she was not creating it all herself, but to the level of frustration that the sellers took things to was ridiculous. (Wolverson, 2013). From that point on, she steered clear of Etsy as a seller and it seems that others interested in entering the Etsy marketplace understood that if the site itself does not crack down on you for being one hundred percent a handmade crafter,

the community will be sure to find you and tear you apart. It may give off a strong negative connotation to many, but these people making a business for themselves, a livelihood and name in the creative world. They do not want someone to just jump into it and go places when they are not even creating it themselves, that goes against their ideas and putting time and effort into something they care about that they want someone else to experience.

### **Conclusion**

We have started to miss and want tactile goods that are created by another person because of their uniqueness, but also their authenticity and humanistic traits we do not experience on a screen. The handcrafted industry has really stepped up in the past twenty years to give themselves a name again. When we are living in this era where humans have grown accustomed to relying on technology to keep us distracted, it is nice to see something pull us away with a personalized, humanistic feel. Through handmade items the creator show their personality, passion, skill, and all of those together attract customers to purchase their goods for themselves and others. Handcrafted goods were once a largely popular thing before the Industrial Revolution, which was when mankind started to see what machinery could do for us.

We genuinely miss the connection we had with those items when they are lifeless as they come off the assembly line. We want to know how that item came to be; how it started as a thought or dream and turned into a passion project of that creator that then took off even further. People appreciate the uniqueness of someone's craft and see the nuances the creator puts into the object. We want to support the underdog and help individuals succeed. That story of the object then in turn makes an impact on the buyer's

emotions and appreciation for that craft. We crave that tactile experience from a letterpress card to a hand-thrown mug, or even a journal bound by hand. Technology has made us glaze over the digital images we see each and every day, but there is something about those mom & pop shops that draw us in to look at and enjoy the handcrafted items they carry in their stores. We want to know their stories and where they came from; we want to experience these items and bring the ones that make an impact on us into our homes because they hold those humanistic values, that aura, and that authenticity of being truly created. The creative world is always growing and changing, but it is the appreciation we have as humans towards these crafts that really hit home for us as consumers, but also the craftsmen that create them for us to enjoy.

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doi:10.1093/jcr/ucx057