



## Book review

*The Pursuit of Pleasurable Work: Craftwork in Twenty-First Century England* Trevor H. J. Marchand (2021) New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 482pp. ISBN 978-1-80073-274-2, h/bk, £132.00

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Ostensibly, Trevor H. J. Marchand's *The Pursuit of Pleasurable Work: Craftwork in Twenty-First Century England* is a work of anthropology (it is volume 4 of the publisher Berghahn's 'New Anthropologies of Europe' series). But its scope extends beyond one disciplinary area. The book's chapters mainly draw from Marchand's ethnographic fieldwork at the Building Crafts College in Stratford, London, where he took a course in fine woodworking from 2005-7. Subsequent research followed, but Marchand's immersion in the course, shown by his deep engagement with the techniques, tools and materials of fine woodworking and the social bonds with fellow students and tutors that flourished during his study, served to deepen his commitment to craft. Marchand admits in the epilogue that he had 'become too close to my subject of study' (p. 328). But it is precisely this proximity that renders this an impassioned book, that alongside its anthropological rigour (with an impressive bibliography to mine), has elements of biography, philosophy, slices of design and craft history, and running throughout, a polemic advancing craft's position in the world.

Marchand has been a key figure in craft scholarship over the last twenty years. His studies of craftspeople and the apprenticeship systems in Yemen and among the mud masons of Djenné in Mali are important works that feature on many reading lists of craft studies. (Marchand 2001; Marchand 2009) His approach is distinct: rather than observing communities of making from a distance, from behind a clipboard, camera or computer, he gets involved in the physical act of making, signing on as a labourer in the building sites in Yemen and Mali, and in the case of the major fieldwork in this book, enrolling on a course of fine woodworking. It is a form of ethnography through apprenticeship and technical learning that has proven popular among a range of craft practitioner-researchers as well as students in art and design schools. (Marchand 2016; O'Connor 2005) The subjectivity of the researcher as a labouring body is welcomed and accentuated, seen as a way into the mysteries and richness of craft practices that can be best understood through embodied experience rather than desk research, or even oral testimony. Marchand describes this as 'exchange of toil for ethnographic exchange' (p. 57) and states that lugging mortar on minaret building sites and being a woodworking student enabled his transformation from a "'foreign outsider" to team member' that led to long-term friendships (p. 58). It is a mode of embedding into a community of craft practice that, for the author, taps into a rich stream of data about social hierarchies of skill, relationships between master and apprentice, banter, the aspirations of artisans, and the autonomy that craft practice offers. Extensive references demonstrate how Marchand has arrived at this innovative methodology, although Peter Dormer's book *Art of the Maker* (1994), where the craft scholar did a similar thing by researching carpentry and calligraphy by actually doing it, is curiously absent.

Chapter 1 provides a personable overview of Marchand's fieldwork in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula in the early part of his career and how these experiences fuelled his

interest in craft. Back in London in 2004, and reading William Morris late into the night, Marchand decided to enrol in the fine woodworking course at the Building Crafts College to develop both his 'apprentice-style fieldwork' (p. xv) and explore the notion of craft as pleasurable work. Before the readers join Marchand at the start of his course, two brief chapters provide historical context: Chapter 2 tracks the development of London's Worshipful Company of Carpenters, the medieval and early modern apprenticeship system within City livery companies, and their increasingly charitable status from the nineteenth century. Chapter 3 provides a more discrete history of the Building Crafts College, established in 1893 by the Carpenters' Company as a technical training school, and how apprenticeships have fared in the twentieth century UK education. The answer is: not well. Marchand shows how apprenticeship training has been subject to political gameplaying, particularly in the last fifty years. Politicians have been aware of the broad electoral appeal of 'skilling up' young people, but the welter of schemes – YOPs (Youth Opportunities Programme) in the 1970s, YTS (Youth Training Scheme) in the 1980s, Modern Apprenticeships from the 1990s – have done little to improve the skill levels of the British workforce due to under-investment. This is not from lack of enthusiasm. The buoyant enrolment rates at the Building Crafts College are testament to the broad level of interest in learning technical and craft skills.

In Chapter 4, "Getting Started," Marchand introduces the reader to the specifics of the fine woodworking course at the Building Crafts College and his fellow students. These descriptions of his day-to-day experience allow the reader to be a fly-on-the-wall. Marchand captures the dynamics of the student cohorts, the friction between fine woodworking students and those on Modern Apprenticeships, and the development of his friendships. These lead to revealing insights into what motivates individuals in their pursuit of fine woodworking (and craft more general). Later chapters follow this mould, with attention to the instructors in the course in Chapter 5; a 'thick transcription' of a shop floor dialogue between an instructor and young student working through a process in Chapter 8; an account of the different pressures the trainee woodworkers face as their course comes to an end in Chapter 9; and various interviews with older woodworkers in Chapter 10.

Throughout, Marchand does his utmost to emphasise the power of tacit knowledge. Demonstration (dealt with in Chapter 4) is the primary means by which Marchand learns fine woodworking, and he cites Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others, in support of his belief that words cannot capture the fullness of action (p. 137). Applied to craft, theory articulated through words is not match for following gesture, movements and speech of the instructor at the workbench. It is hard to refute this argument, even if such a direct, pastoral, attentive and apprenticeship-like mode of education is inherently only available to a few. But the more immediate issue for the reader, is how this tacit knowledge is presented in the form of a very detailed, 'thick,' written ethnography. The book is text-heavy, with too few images given the subject matter, and none in colour. This restricts the potential audience of the book, and indeed frustrates more fluid, poetic, experimental and visual ways of conveying tacit knowledge that might be more effective and better prove Marchand's point about its power, and argument I have made in a review of one of Marchand's previous books. (Knott 2016: 77)

Nevertheless, Marchand's observations and interviews show how 'the pursuit of pleasurable work' is a strong motivation for craftspeople of all ages and in a variety of cultural and economic circumstances. One typology that Marchand pays particular attention to are the 'vocational migrants,' a group of people who have left reliable, reasonably paid jobs to pursue a 'meaningful vocation' and 'participate in a more aesthetic way of living' (p. 177). Chapter 6, 'Vocational Migrants to Craftwork' looked set to deal with this, but it is an awkward amalgam of a talk given at the Building Crafts College by contemporary woodworker Philip Koomen during the author's woodworking training and a brief history of English utopian thought. The purpose was to demonstrate the importance of works like William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and other utopian Arts and Craft references to 'vocational migrants' seeking holistic and meaningful ways of life. But Marchand perhaps overestimates the importance of this body of literature and its romantic characterisation of hand skill.

Throughout the book Marchand's regularly looks back to Morris and Ruskin to substantiate his thesis on pleasurable work. Yet their Victorian prejudices are not critically examined. David Pye and his robust and workshop-focused analyses in *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* is given another theorist that is given space – Pye's lexicon of certainty and risk in craftwork is useful in understanding the dynamics of apprentice and student learning. However, Pye's putdown of Ruskin in a latter chapter of his book merited inclusion and might have helped temper Marchand's enthusiasm for arts and crafts thinking. For example, in his critique of Ruskin's 'The Nature of Gothic,' Pye points out Ruskin's actual disregard for skilled making:

In [On the Nature of Gothic] Ruskin did injustice to Victorian workmanship and to the men who produced it, whom he called slaves, and he influenced William Morris to cause yet more harm. Between them they diverted the attention of educated people from what was good in the workmanship of their own time, and encouraged them to despise it, and so hastened its eventual decline. (Pye 1994: 121)

Marchand's citations of Morris and Ruskin – their celebration of pleasurable work conceived in stark, and simplified, opposition to industrial capitalism – are in danger of repeating the same mistake that Pye alerts us to. The features of apprenticeship training lauded by Marchand were, and to an extent still are, often evident in the environment of the factory, such as reciprocal, verbal exchange so key to learning and mastering a set of skills. Such knowledge transmission also takes place in a domestic, familial context; an area of craft learning that is completely overlooked in the book.

The culture of fine woodworking, as Marchand describes, is male-dominated. There are very few female students on the course – both at the time of Marchand's fieldwork and historically. Thus, Marchand's observations speak volumes on cultures of masculinity in the environment of skilled making and learning: laddish banter; competition; brotherly camaraderie. Apprenticeship more generally is a form of learning that has not favoured women. Knowledge is passed down a vertical chain, in an environment that is protectionist and tightly controlled, often by men; patrimony and male-only membership took until the twenty-first century to be abolished in the Carpenters' Company (p. 102). Marchand is fully aware of this gender imbalance: it was stark during his fieldwork in Djenné and Yemen. But

despite this, Marchand continues to praise the system that has historically marginalised women, as well as other marginal, often immigrant, communities. Other criticisms of apprenticeships – physical hardship, exploitation, repetitive tasks, poor wages and sour master-student relations– are also acknowledged by Marchand (pp. 59-60), but they do not blunt his steadfast commitment to this intimate form of craft instruction.

Has Marchand got too close to his subject, his willingness to skim over weaknesses of apprenticeship models of learning a result of his own experience at the Building Crafts College? Maybe. As many students do, Marchand got completely engrossed in his learning while on the course, something revealed in an admirable section of the epilogue where Marchand invites one of his fellow students to interview him. The apprenticeship-as-research method leads Marchand to multiple valuable insights and compelling narratives that are a joy to read throughout the book, as are the accounts of the various pathways to skilled making and pleasurable work recounted by his subjects. However, it is the step up from this direct testimony that Marchand gathers to the wider moral value of craft where questions arise and the reader's eyebrows furrow. Would Marchand's conclusions about skilled making be the same had he taken a different course of craft instruction, in a different college, in a different medium? Should technical training in a narrow area deserve such ardent advocacy given the economic value of cross-disciplinary focused art and design degrees that encourage fluid, creative thinking, skills that are in demand in the global labour market? I share, like many readers of this Journal I am sure, Marchand's concern with the lack of opportunities for children and young people to learn craft now that schools and colleges have been stripped of resources, and universities are run like businesses, wary of supporting expensive and space-hungry courses. To get craft back into the curriculum, though, needs hard-nosed economic awareness and observation of its precise place in the country today – in consumption, retail, home improvement, repair, tourism. The craft revival of this century surely must assert its difference from Arts and Craft precedents.

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