

## **NEOCRAFT - the movement for the renewal of the crafts**

In November 2007, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, Canada, hosted a conference on the future of applied art. Under the heading of „Neocraft“, it intended to find a concept for its renewal. Just as William Morris, in the late 19th century (1834-1896), and the Arts and Crafts Society, founded in 1888 by Charles-Robert Ashbee (1863-1942), then later, in 1907 the Deutscher Werkbund, whose influence spread to the whole of Europe, all tried to preserve craftsmanship from the onslaught of the machine, Neocraft now aims to determine where the crafts stand between industry and fine art. Neocraft needs to find a new purpose in life with the energy that remains from arts and crafts.

In William Morris at the end of the 19th century, the crafts had found their greatest advocate, but it was also Morris who was forced to realise the futility of using them as a means to achieve social reform. He was trained in various branches of the crafts, and in his hands, such valuable items were created that only a small number of wealthy individuals could afford these artworks. These were peripheral products of greatly limited effectiveness, and they developed into the precise opposite of something that was originally aimed to achieve social reform. Morris soon recognised the paradox that only crafts with a distinctly artistic aims could compete and survive.

The day before yesterday, industrialism was the dominant force field in the world. Yesterday it was capitalism. Today it is globality. Nothing has disappeared, it has all just found something more comprehensive in addition. If we talk of the obvious changes, the mass consumption, transportation, the architecture of change, we are scarcely aware of the entire breadth and depth of the transformation. It not only touches us, it wholly permeates us. Thinking and feeling change, the evaluation of types of people, of cities, the terminology. The songs and the poems, not to mention the images and films. Sentimentality, nostalgia, thinking small are no longer in fashion. The numbers of the depressed are growing just as quickly as the numbers of those who are caught up in it and keenly anticipate the appearance of the next iPod touch, shuffle or jailbreak. And the crafts become Neocraft. Not just a new term but a new hierarchy of values.

What is the special kind of independence that is to be preserved and brought in line with the conditions of modern life? What is old hat and what is new? What exists is not new but what it encounters (the principle of the computer).

And the purpose of renewal is to motivate, to unleash a surge of innovation and to stimulate subjective ability. The biggest problem in this is the social element, which led to Morris's failure: industrialism produces more goods that are required, which means it is socially superior. The problems of the aesthetic component are smaller than the social ones. All of this is repeated under more intense and advanced conditions. In terms of politics, Neocraft is like a green party that discusses the politico-economic and social conditions of the times. The arts-and-crafts and fine art form a grand coalition. Is it an alliance of the forces of creativity in the interests of self-defence? In this alliance, industrial capitalism intensifies the conflict between the social classes of the arts as a whole. And the arts-and-crafts raise an admonishing finger to point out the ossification of the masses in uniformity (which is not new) and, on the other hand, the behaviour of the capitalist art market (which has got worse). Survival is the problem. And when Karl Marx has been damned, metaphysics once more raises its head. Even in the past, handicrafts, as a refuge of individual production from a supposedly soulless, high-tech world, were a sentimental escape route.

What about tradition? Fine art conceives of itself as being modern by firstly burning all the bridges to tradition. Secondly, it endeavours to be global as an expression of international cultural interests. And thirdly, one of the basic elements is the rapid succession of trends or movements: who or whatever was in vogue today is out of favour tomorrow. It is this lack of constancy that has especially been criticised. But it also the expression of the desire to broaden experience – a positive aspect, even if it is socially unjustifiable. It is down to innovation to come to terms with this problem.

After all, it is not just the skills, structures and the ethical concepts that made up what used to be the crafts; it is also what has happened in the one hundred and thirty years since the emergence of industrialisation. Those were innovations too. What part of that is still important today? A concept of art as an expression of inner reality started in various currents of symbolism at the end of the 19th century. Art as an interpretation of an emotion or an idea, captured in concrete forms. Van de Valde took up Morris's legacy and transferred it into the future. Applied art strove to achieve the same standing as had hitherto only been accorded to painting and

sculpture. The aesthetic alternatives to a world that was supposed to be becoming impoverished by the use of technology were of a distinctly artistic nature or were simply restorative.

Neocraft is different. To fight against progress would be foolish. What is important is to be part of progress oneself. This is why a resumé of the conference in Halifax is called „Modernity and the Crafts“, which Sandra Wilson has published as a book (The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, Halifax 2007). It was after all merely a round of discussions, and so Neocraft is a matter of opinion in the fifteen essays, so it is still in a state of uncertainty. Accordingly, it is only the interdisciplinary cooperation of science, technology and philosophy that is seen as an essential characteristic of Neocraft.

What this means practically for ceramics firstly comes down to retaining the authority of the material, but also working with industrially produced materials, ready-to-use bodies and glazes, without making a secret of it. Then there is the authority of tradition. To put it into question does not by any means imply ignoring past epochs in art and their techniques.

On the contrary. Neocraft unhesitatingly takes advantage of artistic techniques that were tested or successfully employed in the past century, as well as of art from the past such as symbolism or art déco that is not subject to the laws of time but has remained contemporary and modern, without their forms being imitated. Neocraft is to make its appearance with a new decorative and symbolic form of art. It is almost as if Goethe's maxim had been coined specifically for this situation: „[Mankind] demands to see the familiar and the accustomed in a changed form“ (Maxims and Reflections 981). Without fearing being devalued as decoration or illustration, or being accused of spiritualism. This has the greatest chances of society becoming interested in it because it is in accordance with the taste of technically and culturally advanced middle class society. The social question can find a satisfactory answer in this way.

Neocraft, as an unmistakable expression of creative individuality, is also suited to attracting new talents and gaining popularity in museums and exhibitions. The main focus is still on illustrations. The „Forum der Illustrative“ was on show in Zurich, Dubai and Berlin in 2008/9, and in a Neocraft exhibition in Berlin in June and July 2010, illustrator Olaf Hayek played the leading role with his „Flowerheads“, along side blown glass by Jan Lambert Kruse from Sweden, wooden cups and plates by Oji Masanori from Tokyo and a table installation by Line Depping from Denmark. It was all termed „typical Neocraft“, with a „charm and warmth“ that „distinguishes it from art and design. It was an exhibition described as an „art festival“, and took place in Zurich, Paris and Berlin, organised by the nonprofit „Berlin Initiative Illustration e.V.“, which focuses on graphic art – also the priority of art déco.

The two important systems that link art and society are the art market and the art schools. The academies will have to be on their guard. They must recognise Neocraft as an avant-garde movement and contribute to its development.