

## **Amateur Craft: History and Theory** *Stephen Knott*

**Reviewed by Amy Twigger Holroyd**

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Amateur craft is incredibly well-served in terms of instructional texts, yet notably under-represented in academic literature. In *Amateur Craft* Stephen Knott deftly uses the former – manuals, handbooks, how-to pamphlets and so on – to make an important and timely contribution to the latter. The book is based on Knott's PhD research, which was carried out at The Royal College of Art and the Victoria & Albert Museum under the supervision of Glenn Adamson and Hans Stofer. Drawing on a range of case studies, the book offers a historically grounded and meticulously argued thesis on the multifaceted and nebulous phenomenon of amateur craft.

In a brief introduction Knott explains the theme, aims and approach of the book. His central argument is that amateur craft is both “the freest, most autonomous form of making” to be found in the modern Western world, and – at once – “beset by limitations”. In striking this balance, Knott seeks to distance himself from those who, in his view, over-romanticise the expressive freedom offered by craft. He engages at length with influential thinkers including Marx, Adorno and Arendt. Henri Lefebvre's concept of differential space – “cultural expressions that depart from the conventions of everyday life while simultaneously relying on them” – plays a central role. Knott manages to elegantly traverse these dense philosophical sources and offer a clearly communicated analysis of their relevance to amateur craft.

The book is divided into three expansive chapters: “Surface”, “Space” and “Time”. Each chapter takes in a number of case studies, explored in varying degrees of detail. The first chapter explores surface intervention: making marks on two-dimensional surfaces, from enamel to paint-by-numbers. The second chapter discusses the spaces where amateur craft takes place, illustrated by a major case study of suburban chicken-keeping between 1870 and 1920. The final chapter investigates what motivates individuals to labour in their leisure time, illustrated through a detailed case study of amateur railway modellers.

This brief summary highlights the broad interpretation of craft utilised in the book. The case studies of painting, chicken-keeping and railway modelling sit beyond the boundaries of craft as defined by the UK Crafts Council, though fall short of the much more inclusive understanding proposed by Richard Sennett in *The Craftsman*. While there is some discussion of woodworking in Chapter 2, other widespread practices such as needlework and pottery – along with the types of digital making that are increasingly popular today – are largely overlooked. This is not necessarily a problem: the examples

have undoubtedly been carefully selected to shed light on the book's themes. Yet without an explicit statement at the outset of the book explaining the understanding of craft being used, the reader can only guess at the scope of the discussion. I found the inclusion of painting as the first major case study to be particularly challenging, especially as the text repeatedly refers to *art* production and *art* history – rather than, as might reasonably be expected, *craft* production and *craft* history.

A key argument of *Amateur Craft* is that for amateur makers, the experience of time is more important than the end result. This argument chimes with Andrew Jackson's study of "serious leisure" makers, which found that "the possession or use of the final artifact was the least important part of the activity".<sup>1</sup> In her study of amateur quilters, sociologist Marybeth Stalp identified a similar attitude.<sup>2</sup> Yet my own doctoral research into the experiences of amateur knitters challenges the position that the quality of an outcome is unimportant to its maker. For the majority of people making their own clothes, the outcome of their making – and the ability to make use of that outcome – is highly significant. A garment is intended for use, and wearing a homemade garment legitimates the activity of making it. I wholeheartedly agree with Knott that the process of making offers benefits far beyond the physical outcome. I also concur that research into amateur craft must not judge the quality of the items produced, instead focusing analysis on the making process. But it is important to acknowledge that there may be situations in which makers hope to make use of the things they have made, and will therefore judge the quality of their *own* production.

In the introduction, Knott explains that he aims "to develop theories of modern amateur practice, substantiated by historical case studies that challenge our stereotypical assumptions." The level of detail in which the historical examples are explored is impressive, offering a revealing insight into a diverse range of making practices. However, Knott's approach to drawing out perspectives on contemporary practice – included at the end of each chapter – did not quite work for me. The final section of Chapter 1, for example, discussed the use of "amateur" surface intervention techniques by professional artists in the past two decades. A profile of the Bodging Milano project, in which well-known furniture designers took to the Herefordshire countryside to make in "amateur" space, made more sense at the end of Chapter 2. Yet in both cases a highly considered discussion of amateur making concluded with a focus on professional activity. I could not help but wish that Knott had used a short case study of contemporary *amateur* craft to apply his arguments to present day activity.

Overall, this is a valuable book which presents complex theoretical argument and historical detail in an engaging and compelling narrative. Knott strikes an important balance in his writing: he is generous to amateur makers – for example, in his discussion of copying – without fetishising or romanticising their activity. For me, the great triumph of the book is his discussion of the ways in which amateur practice is shaped by the materials provided by the commercial system it sits within. This discussion will be of great use to me as I continue my research into amateur knitting, and in particular the provision of "scaffolds" to support independent domestic practice. I am sure that other readers will similarly find

arguments, examples and discussions in this wide-ranging book to inspire and inform their own theoretical or practical activity.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Jackson, “Constructing at home: understanding the experience of the amateur maker,” *Design and Culture* 2/1 (2010), p. 5–26.

<sup>2</sup> Marybeth C. Stalp, *Quilting: The Fabric of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2008).