

William Morris, Walmart, and Appalachian Arts: A Personal Reflection

by Joy Gritton

Since the late nineteenth century Appalachian arts and crafts have played a central role in a larger construct of the region—a construct characterized by isolation, rural self-sufficiency, primitive technology, material impoverishment, and fiercely guarded homogeneous traditions. Appalachia came to serve as both refuge and crusade for American proponents of the Arts and Crafts Movement inspired by the work of Englishmen John Ruskin and William Morris, who were convinced of the moral value of working with one’s hands to craft useful items of beauty. Leaders of the mountain handcraft revival, such as Allen Eaton, Olive Dame Campbell, and the founders of various settlement schools and cooperative arts centers, worked throughout the first half of the twentieth century to insure the survival of this utopian ideal by offering training workshops, organizing exhibits, and securing outside markets for the region’s arts. They thus hoped to positively affect the economy of the region, encourage handwork as a viable alternative to wage labor, enable people to stay in rural areas, and stem the personal alienation and cultural disintegration that they believed followed from modernization, worldliness, and affluence.

A century later this “ideal” persists because it has remained palatable to urbanites weary of industrialization, mass production, immigration, and soul-numbing but financially secure lives. Artists and arts educators still find it difficult to expand or ignore the Arts and Crafts Movement model, despite rapid change in almost every aspect of life in Appalachia. This raises important questions, including ones of identity, class, “authenticity,” and autonomy as they relate to the future of the region’s arts. I would like to explore some of these issues, not as one who has the answers, but as an artist, art historian, art educator, and community member who is struggling to find my way—there is a clearly marked exit that will take me to the Walmart and a back road through the hills mapped out by Morris, and I’m not sure that either route is going to get me, my students, and my neighbors where we need to go.

The region’s Arts and Crafts initiatives have always relied heavily, if not exclusively, on an outside, middle to high income (i.e. non-Walmart shopper) market for survival, even though this arrangement is not always consistent with the movement’s professed humanist goals. Jennie Lester Hill, who came to manage Berea’s Fireside Industries in 1903, expressed little confidence that the products of Appalachian looms would find much use in the homes of the mountain women who produced them:

“What is the future of these fireside industries?”, we are sometimes asked. “Will they die out as the mountain region is opened to trade, and machine-made products take the place of the homespun?” So far as the uses of the mountaineers themselves are concerned, this will probably be the case. But for real well-made homespun products there is an ever growing demand. Nothing is more artistic for furnishing country houses or for country wear. The mountain girl may choose the flashy, shoddy goods at the country store in preference to her mother’s homespun, for it is new to her, but the golf girl will not.¹

Of course, creating work for a buyer from a different socio-economic, cultural and/or geographic background frequently leads to an aesthetic disjoint between potential patrons’ expectations and artists’ aesthetic sensibilities, and traditionally craft developers have stepped in to bridge this marketing hazard. Thus, while Frances Goodrich initially became interested in the coverlets produced in and around Brittain’s Cove, North Carolina, her Allanstand Cottage Industries soon moved to an expanded line of portieres, lounge covers, and table cloths which were advertised in missionary magazines and northern newspapers. Both Goodrich and Winogene Redding, founder of the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School Weavers Guild, supplied designs for mountain women to weave, so as to facilitate their ability to meet the demands of the outside market.²

A 1944 Marian Heard interview with Mrs. Napoleon Bonaparte Ashe of the Ashe Shop of Sylva, North Carolina indicated that she decided on design, color, size and materials used by the mountain women weavers in her shop. When asked if she fostered the “creative” ideas of the workers, she responded, “They don’t have any.” Stuart Nye, of the Nye Silver Shop told Heard that “very few [workers] have any original ideas; however, once and a while there is a girl who likes to create.”³

The Rockefeller funded Marian Heard survey, which canvassed 3,727 craft workers in seven states, as well as 29 craft business organizations and 38 schools, asked artists about their training, the type of work produced, earnings and hours worked, and the markets for which they produced. There were also categories of data such as what they spent their craft earnings on and how effectively they used crafts in their own home. Finally, there was a large space left for Heard’s own “Remarks.”⁴

It is evident from this last section that Heard generally had more confidence in artists trained by mainstream art schools, universities, and Guild centers, than those who had learned their craft within their own families. She also seemed most comfortable with middle class professional men and women, or the wives of professionals. These individuals usually received high marks for use of crafts in their own homes, and also for their leadership skills, and cooperative spirit. She was particularly complimentary towards alumni of the University of Tennessee, where she taught, and members of the Guild with whom she had had considerable contact.

For example, one former UT student was described as “a very fine craftsman in both techniques and design. Fine teacher and a person who will go very far in the craft field. Good advanced scholarship material, good speaker and writer. Possible Guild officer material.” A Marion, Virginia weaver who had learned her craft at Berea and had taught vocational education, was likewise praised as an “excellent teacher” with “good design, color and merchandizing,” an “attractive personality,” and “very fine use of crafts in home.” By contrast, a Woodbury, Tennessee basket maker who took in wash from her neighbors and learned basket making from her mother was summarized as “getting poor prices from truckers” and “producing very few baskets. Is not cooperative.” Similarly, a farmer’s wife who learned to braid rugs from her mother-in-law and who worked at this for a living was tersely dismissed with, “will never produce much; work just ordinary. Needs much help in color and techniques.”

Heard quoted two weavers who had had difficulty selling their products. “It’s a hard thing to know what those city people want. Now me, I like bright, pretty colors—a little pink and yellow, but they don’t like my colors,” complained one. “It’s pretty and it’s bright but it ain’t pleasin’ them nohow,” agreed the other. Heard went on to conclude that these women’s “houses are dark, their lives drab and barren. In their creative urge they want to make for other people what they do not have themselves—the gayer the better.”⁵

Artists could be taught to put their own “drab” lives aside and produce what the outside buyer wanted and/or they could be supplied with suggested color schemes, patterns and products. But both Ruskin and Morris warned against just such a separation of the creative design process and the labor of handwork. Morris, a staunch Socialist, advocated for the overthrow of a profit-driven power structure that forced the working class to toil long hours to provide for the rich a life of luxury. He made a distinction between riches, which he described as wasteful “articles of folly and luxury” and wealth, which he explained had to do with what Nature gives us and what we make of those gifts—“sunlight, the fresh air, the unspoiled face of the earth, food, raiment and housing necessary and decent; the storing up of knowledge of all kinds . . . works of art, the beauty which man creates when he is most a man, most aspiring and thoughtful—all things which serve the pleasure of people . . .”⁶ Of course, he advocated the overthrow of the privileged from the comfortable position of the privileged and without the input of the working class he sought to champion. Allen Eaton also cautioned against considering only the demand and price of an object at the expense of taking into account “what the creation of that object has done to or for its maker.” He noted that, “most people will no longer purchase goods knowingly from a sweatshop, yet they do not seem to recognize the grey areas between actual physical and mental abuse and joy and fulfillment in work.”⁷

Here in twenty-first century Appalachia, we are still grappling with these notions of power, class, profit, and creativity. My husband makes his living with his pottery and he negotiates these realities regularly. I understand the necessity of knowing and responding to your market if you do not have the luxury of producing art for art’s sake only. But I also wonder, what happens to the moral benefits of handwork when artists no longer create useful, well-crafted objects for their own families and communities, but rather solely for a buyer of a different socio-economic class, culture, and/or region? Do Appalachian communities not need the restorative, nurturing, healing power of art as much as they need its economic rejuvenation? Is it okay that we throw mugs on the wheel to sell in Asheville, while we drink from plastic Walmart cups at home?

How susceptible are our artists to the seduction of producing only those objects that conform to the constructed “ideal” of Appalachia and the needs of those with the economic resources to purchase art, rather than also producing objects that respond to the present needs and realities of the region? What happens if the poverty of Appalachia comes in a form that is no longer as palatable to the arts and crafts buying public? Trailers with straight pipes don’t carry the same draw as quaint log cabins. NASCAR crazed teens on ATVs are not as charming as barefoot children in bonnets. When we can no longer provide the wealthier urbanites’ fantasy of the pure, untainted mountain refuge, will they still care about arts training for our young people or finding a way to allow them to stay in our communities? Will they still want to purchase our art when that bubble is burst? Would a piece on OxyContin sell? Would one on the environmental degradation of mining or mountain top removal?

And if Appalachian art is not to be defined by the Arts and Crafts movement model, how then? How will the people of the region themselves define their creative

work? What is Appalachian art? Is a piece Appalachian because the artist lives and works here? Because it expresses the Appalachian experience? Because it is made with Appalachian materials and/or techniques? Is there a place in Appalachian art for the Walmart crafter who sells at the Sorghum Festival *and* the university-trained web designer? Can Appalachian art be defined so as to include low and high tech, Dayton and Harlan County, working class as well as middle class? And if the people themselves define the art, will it still be economically viable? Will it in any case have value and meaning and a place in our communities? Will it give us wealth, if not riches?

Endnotes

1. Jennie Lester Hill, "Fireside Industries in the Kentucky Mountains," *Southern Workman*, 32 (April 1903), 212.

2. "Winogene B. Redding," n.d., and transcript of interview with Winogene B. Redding, Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, 18 March 1965, Membership Biographical Data Files, Southern Highland Handicraft Guild Papers, Folk Art Center, Asheville, N. C. cited in Jane S. Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk 1930-1940* (Chapel Hill: The U of NCP), 73; Becker 64-65; and Allen Eaton, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* (New York: Dover Publications, 1937, 1973) 72.

3. "Producing Centers and Schools," folder 5851, box 546, series 950.5, RG 1.3, General Education Board, Rockefeller Archive Center, North Tarrytown, New York.

4. "Marian Heard Survey," 1943, folder 5859, box 547, series 950.S, RG 1.3, General Education Board, Rockefeller Archive Center.

5. "An Exploratory Year Looking Toward A Craft Education Project in the Southern Highlands," submitted to the General Education Board by the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild and the Southern Highlanders, Inc. December 14, 1943. Heard Report, folder 5851, Box 546, series 950.5, RG 1.3, General Education Board, Rockefeller Archive Center, 25.

6. William Morris, "Useful Work v. Useless Toil," in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, Vol. 23, New York: Russell and Russell, 1966, 103.

7. Eaton, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands*, 21; Allen Eaton, *Handicrafts of New England* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1949), 338, 340.