

# Craft: An American History,' by Glenn Adamson: An Excerpt

---

Jan. 19, 2021

## Chapter 1

He could be holding a book, a skull, or a prize melon. Instead, he has a silver teapot. We are face-to-face with an artisan and his creation, witness not to an act of making, but rather to his reflection on that act, both literally and figuratively. One skillful hand is doubled in the smoothly polished metal he holds, while the other props up his clean-shaven chin in a gesture of unhurried consideration.

Walk into the American galleries at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and you will see the painting straightaway, in pride of place, dead center on the first wall: John Singleton Copley's portrait of Paul Revere. The curators have surrounded the picture with surviving specimens of the smith's handiwork, including his famous Sons of Liberty Bowl, which pays tribute to the "Glorious Ninety-Two" members of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, who confronted the British Crown over punitive taxes. Copley, similarly, supplied Revere with the tools of his trade: two burins and a needle for engraving, and a sand-filled leather pad on which to steady the teapot as he worked. These proofs of his profession are practical, unpretentious, so different from the allegorical props that might appear in a painting of an aristocrat, or a saint. Even the two gold buttons visible on Revere's woolen waistcoat are likely of his own manufacture. He does, however, sit at a polished table, perhaps of mahogany. A strange choice for a work surface, it reads instead as artistic license, affording an opportunity for the painting's most breathtaking passage, the soft reflected glow of Revere's freshly laundered shirtsleeves.

We don't actually know why Copley painted the portrait, or whether it was commissioned by Revere himself, though that seems likely. But for generations, it has been understood as embodying America's virtues on the verge of the country's independence: clarity, pragmatism, and self-sufficiency. Not incidentally, the picture is also beautifully crafted. Copley's workmanship, as supremely competent as Revere's own, adds to the feeling of solidity and directness, so often seen as defining the national character.

[ *Return to the review of "Craft."* ]

But straightforwardness can be a surprisingly complicated thing, and Copley's portrait of Revere serves as an ideal entry point to the history of American craft precisely because it is not simple. The design Revere is about to inscribe into the teapot is likely a coat of arms, an emblem of aristocracy. In 1768, when Copley painted his portrait, both painter and smith were not only British subjects, but also dependent on elite patronage. Neither could have suspected that a revolution was

soon to come, or known the diametrically opposing parts they would play in it. Copley, married into a family of wealthy loyalists, departed for London. Taking advice from his fellow expatriate artist Benjamin West, he shed his early style for a more cosmopolitan, painterly manner. Revere, of course, would attain legendary status for his midnight ride, alerting townsfolk that the British were coming. By then he'd already stopped making vessels for serving British-imported tea—crates of which were sitting at the bottom of the harbor, having been dumped overboard by insurrectionaries dressed as Native Americans. He made coffeepots instead.

During the revolution, Revere had no time to engage in his craft, and in the decades after the war he, too, shifted course professionally, becoming an innovator in industrial techniques. He parlayed his knowledge of metalwork into the mass production of simple items like harness fittings and buckles and the large-scale casting of cannon and bells. Eventually, he operated a furnace and rolling mill, which he used to fabricate copper sheathing for ships. In their different ways, then,

these two men were eager to transcend their artisan identities. Copley came to see his early paintings, so carefully delineated and richly detailed, as embarrassingly provincial. In moving to London, he had wanted to escape the status of a painter in America—"no more than any other useful trade, as they sometimes term it, like that of a Carpenter tailor or shoemaker, not as one of the most noble Arts in the world." In this he largely succeeded. Revere, too, elevated himself, at least in his own eyes. In 1781, he had described himself as "very well off, for a tradesman." He wanted instead to be an entrepreneur and merchant, and soon thereafter began describing himself that way on official documents.

As to the proud self-sufficiency of the American craftsman, that, too, is a complex matter. Copley's tools (hog hair brushes, pre-cut canvases, and bladders for storing paint) and pigments (lead white, Prussian blue, vermilion, and more) were all English imports. So, quite likely, were the wool of Revere's waistcoat and the linen of his shirt. (At this date, it is an even bet as to whether these textiles would have been handspun and handwoven or processed with the help of machines.) The silver used to make the teapot might well have circulated in the form of currency, originating in

the mines of Potosí (then in the Viceroyalty of Peru, now Bolivia), while mahogany like that in the depicted table came mainly from Honduras. These were both brutal contexts for enslaved workers, some brought there by force from Africa, others indigenous.

Like everything else in Colonial America, then, the painting and its subject matter were situated within an interdependent network of labor, both skilled and unskilled, free and unfree. The portrait can also be taken as a symbol of craft's dual position in American culture—notice how Copley has painted Revere's left hand not once but twice, as actual substance and reflected image. As telling as it may be, though, the painting is a rare exception. Most artisans are unlike Revere simply because they have been forgotten, their faces and names unrecoverable even when the work of their hands is preserved. Half of them have been women; very many have been African American or of Native heritage. Others immigrated to the United States from Asia or Latin America, bringing their skills with them (and often little else). The story of American craft concerns them all.

The historian Gary Kornblith has observed that “the age of handicraft production did not seem so golden to those who experienced it firsthand.”<sup>5</sup> Colonial artisans faced difficulties both great and small. Most went bankrupt at least once in their careers. They were at the mercy of large-scale economic trends. They often struggled to acquire and retain materials, tools, and even their own apprentices. Indeed, though it is often romanticized, eighteenth-century apprenticeship is best understood as a system of coercive poor relief. Most who found themselves bound to a master got that way against their will, as orphans, or children of impoverished families. By law, they were then required to stay and work for very low wages, usually for seven years, sometimes up to the age of twenty-one. But this European model faltered in the United States, a wide-open country where labor was scarce. Without craft guilds to exert control over training and standards, both information and people moved around freely. In order to keep up with demand, workshop masters were obliged to impart trade secrets to their apprentices and indentured servants. Once they acquired a basic skill set, young craftsmen found it easier to relocate rather than complete their term of service. They were in a classic seller's market: The colonies were ever short of capable hands.

In rural contexts particularly, flexibility was the rule, as artisans turned their skills to whatever needed doing. The Dominy Shop, for example—which operated over four generations in East Hampton, Long Island, and whose shop equipment, tools, and manuscripts are now preserved at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware—was the site of an array of crafts, among them clockmaking, gunsmithing, joinery and cabinetmaking, toolmaking, wheelwrighting, horseshoeing, and sundry repair work. The lives of rural artisans were further varied because they were in their shops only part of the year. At planting and harvest times, they worked in the fields among their neighbors and relations. Noah Webster, he of the first American dictionary, contrasted the situation to that in Europe:

In a populous country, where arts are carried to great perfection, the mechanics are obliged to labour constantly upon a single article. Every art has its several branches, one of which employs a man all his life.

[ *Return to the review of "Craft."* ]

A man who makes heads of pins or springs of watches, spends his days in that manufacture and never looks beyond it. This manner of fabricating things for the use and convenience of life is the means of perfecting the arts; but it cramps the human mind, by confining all its faculties to a point. In countries thinly inhabited, or where people live principally by agriculture, as in America, every man is in some measure an artist—he makes a variety of utensils, rough indeed, but such as will answer his purposes.

This image of the preindustrial artisan as a universal artist is a powerful one, and has served as a touchstone through American history. It is also an exaggeration, because in every artisan's life, there was plenty of repetitive labor to be done. When they were at the anvil, country blacksmiths spent most of their time on a few basic tasks: making nails, sharpening plow blades, repairing chains, shoeing horses, over and over. One-off masterpieces were very rarely called for. In fact, blacksmiths had little choice in what they made. Very few—only 20 percent, by one estimate—even owned their own smithies, instead working as hired hands for the planter who owned the land. In cities, some smiths had opportunities to make decorative work, but many operated within the precincts of dockyards or mills, making chains, anchors, or gears. This was certainly demanding work, requiring high levels of skill, but it was not necessarily inventive. And repetitive labor was routine in other trades, too. Joiners commonly made sets of eight, twelve, or more chairs, all matching, perhaps based on an imported model or a printed pattern "lately from London." Turners speedily fashioned large quantities of identical bowls, stair balusters, or table legs on their foot-powered lathes. Pewterers, many of them itinerant, had even less scope for innovation. Their stock-in-trade consisted of crucibles and molds, which they used to melt down worn or damaged pieces and cast the metal anew.

So, despite later imaginings, preindustrial craft was hardly a stream of constant creativity. Artisans' value lay not in their power of invention, but in their reliability, their *industry*, a term that originally referred not to factories, but to personal work ethic. The Boston silversmith John Coney (who trained Paul Revere's father, the French immigrant Apollos Rivoire) was eulogized on his death in 1712 as "a rare example of industry, a great Redeemer of his Time, taking care to spend not only his Days, but his Hours well, and giving Diligence in his Business." The biblical allusion here—to Ephesians 5:15–16, "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise / Redeeming the time, because the days are evil"—alerts us to the religious context for early American craft. A good artisan, a good Christian, was conscientious. The proof of that character was in the work: consistent results, achieved

under time pressure despite nonstandardized materials and variable work conditions. And though later commentators liked to imagine the Colonial era as a time of “joy in labor,” the Sabbath, a full calendar of holy days, and traditional “Saint Monday” were held as sacrosanct. Artisans were not so joyful that they weren’t eager to get off the job.

So, craft production was not idyllic. But it was essential. Whenever and wherever a new town was founded, it required artisans. The first tax assessment for present-day Allentown, Pennsylvania, drawn up in 1762, had only thirteen taxpayers, but they included two carpenters, two tailors, a smith, and a wagoner; two years later, they had been joined by two more tailors, a furniture maker, a mason, a butcher, and a shoemaker who also ran an inn. As specie (hard coinage) was always limited, especially in rural areas, these artisans exchanged their services with other townspeople on a barter system. Work might be done in exchange for food, for other artisans’ services, or for raw materials like old iron. Extended lines of credit might be held open for months, or even years. All these informal, face-to-face arrangements helped bind the community together.

This pattern had long been established. Way back in 1608, the year after America’s first permanent English settlement was established at Jamestown, the financial backers of the town sent a supply voyage with eight contracted German and Polish craftsmen (who were expert in making turpentine, potash, and glass) and a Swiss miner. The hope was that these men would found industries and train the other unskilled colonists to work them. This reflected an assumption that the colonies would pay off quickly, through resource extraction, a drastic underestimation of the difficulties that living in the New World posed. Dreams of easy riches were quickly dashed. Many settlers died of disease and starvation. The survivors concentrated on feeding themselves (though remarkably, there is archaeological evidence of an early attempt at glassmaking). John Smith, the swashbuckling sea captain who assumed control of the colony’s governing council, saw the continental artisans as the backbone of an otherwise incompetent community: “Only the Dutch-men and Poles, and some dozen others . . . knew what a dayes worke was.”

A decade later, the *Mayflower* arrived in the vicinity of present-day Plymouth. Motivated by religious zeal rather than commercial opportunism, these English and Dutch “pilgrims” were delayed on their crossing and so did not arrive until late in the year. By the time they had determined their place of landing, it was December, and most of them were obliged to wait out the winter on board. William Bradford, the chronicler and governor of Plymouth (and a silk weaver by trade), later wrote, “Having past ye vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before in their preparation, they had now no friends to welcome them, nor inns to entertain or refresh their weatherbeaten bodies, no houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succor.” Come spring, the *Mayflower* sailed away, and the colonists set about building

permanent shelters—dirt-floored, clapboard-sided, thatch-roofed. Carpentry was a matter of life and death, but as late as 1623, one of the settlers wrote back to England reporting that just twenty houses had been completed, of which only five were “fair and pleasant.”

Fortunately for the colonists, there were excellent makers in the area. One of the settlers' very first expeditions on land yielded a find: in Bradford's telling, “diverse fair Indian baskets filled with corn, and some in ears, fair and good, of diverse colors, which seemed to them a very goodly sight.” There was also a metal kettle, obtained through exchange with earlier European traders. The Pilgrims helped themselves to everything they found, intending to use the grain partly for seed. It was a first act of petty theft in a centuries-long pattern of exploitation.

The corn was there for the taking because the people who had inhabited this land for millennia, the Wampanoag (one nation within the wider Algonquian culture of the northeast woodlands) had recently been decimated by disease, contracted from earlier European arrivals (more specifically, shipboard rats). The majority of the population had died in this epidemic, mostly between 1615 and 1619, a tragedy that repeated itself wherever cultural contact occurred between Europeans and Native Americans. By the time Bradford and his brethren arrived, the Wampanoag community had withdrawn from the coastline, leaving not just handmade baskets full of corn, but cleared land and even burial pits, which the colonists used to inter their own numerous dead. Another result of this depopulation was that, even at this point of initial contact with Native peoples, it was already possible for Europeans to see them as figures receding into the past. This was part of the mix of fear, disdain, and idealization that allowed the settlers to justify their own actions. We ourselves should not make the mistake of idealizing Native culture; brutal violence was hardly introduced to the Americas by European settlers. Indigenous nations were both diverse and rivalrous, and had been engaging in both trade and warfare for millennia. The colonists, however, were all but blind to this complex history. They tended to view Native people simply as both uncivilized brutes and “nature's gentlemen,” both pitiable and pure—and in any case, fated to disappear.

Craft assumed an important place within this racist—indeed, genocidal—attitude. One of the most common leitmotifs of commentary on Native people was that they lacked rational understanding. As Alexander Pope wrote in his 1734 *Essay on Man*, “Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor'd mind / Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind; / His soul proud Science never taught to stray.” Now, every European settler, struggling to survive in what seemed a hostile wilderness, was struck by the Natives' practical skills. Wampanoag adults were expected to be self-sufficient, attending to their own food, clothing, and shelter. This meant mastering the skills of hunting, fishing, leatherwork, basketry, wood carving, stonework, pottery, and more. Fire was a key technology, used for warmth and cooking, to

hollow out dugout canoes, and to fell enormous old-growth trees (far easier than using a metal axe, as the colonists tried to do). Rather than seeing this omnicompetence as something to be emulated, however, Europeans tended to juxtapose it with true understanding. The French Jesuit priest Pierre-François Charlevoix, who traveled widely in North America in the 1720s, wrote of Native peoples that “everyone must acknowledge, that they have a wonderful Genius for Mechanics: They have scarce any Need of Masters to excel in them, and we see every Day some who succeed in all Trades without having served an Apprenticeship.” All the same, they were “not fit for the Sciences, which require much Application, and a Course of Study.” Here, in European commentary on indigenous populations, we see the emergence of an attitude that would be deployed to denigrate other kinds of people: Blacks, the working class, women, immigrants. It is a dynamic that runs throughout the history of American craft—a declared preference, among the cultural elite, for knowing *that* over knowing *how*.

[ *Return to the review of “Craft.”* ]