

CRAFTSMANSHIP

By David A. Watson

*"I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free."
Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1474 – 1564*

There may be no lovelier expression of the woodcarver's art than the gently curving scroll of a well-carved violin neck. Achieving such perfection in violin construction (no power tools allowed) was the one true passion of my uncle, the bachelor farmer (of whom I've written previously). High art, indeed, but woodworking such as this also requires great skill. Highly refined as well is work such as that performed by my father, who used his hands to build and repair mechanical objects. He's retired now, but Dad's ability was mechanical; he still is a master of the trade. True craftsmanship, in all its manifestations, is developed over decades. It simply cannot be rushed. Dedication and a ceaseless commitment to excellence are essential. Is craftsmanship a vanishing art, as some suggest, and what will the future hold?

The most recent figures available from the federal government's Bureau of Labor Statistics reveal that the fastest job growth is occurring in the computer and healthcare industries. For the former, all aspects of the care and feeding of computers (e.g. hardware and software engineering, database management, systems analysis, and desktop publishing) represent booming career options. Not surprisingly, each of these specialties requires considerable education, often two, and more commonly four, years of college. For the latter, a bevy of related occupations, usually lumped together as "Allied Health Professions" (e.g. Physician's Assistants, Occupational and Physical Therapists, and Medical, Pharmacy, and Dental Technicians and Assistants), are also strong choices for those entering the job market. Education beyond high school is a necessary qualification here as well. Conversely, occupations showing the largest declines are those that require

on-the-job training (but not higher education), and which involve physical labor. Among these are clerks (of every stripe), bank tellers, and most any job with the word “operator” in its title. This changing employment picture reflects a fundamental shift in our economy; first, that non-skilled, low-wage jobs still existing (e.g. manufacturing) are being moved outside the United States; second, that increasingly, durable goods are being produced using automation; and third, that instead of repairing and re-using these items, we simply replace them (examples include household appliances, televisions and radios, and even vehicles).

Given these trends, shouldn't we just accept that “hand-made” or “hand-crafted” are anachronisms and move on? None of us has the time or inclination to, for example, carve the neck of a violin by hand when a dozen can be created in the same amount of time using a machine, to paint a sunset in oil on canvas when in an hour all the copies one could want of that same sunset can be reproduced as high-resolution prints or digital images, or even to change his own oil. Right? I don't think so. We need craftsmanship, not just for its own sake, but also because of what we (and especially our children) can learn from it. We know that listening to music from an early age, or being asked to create something original (whether it be a painting, a sculpture, or a widget), creates extra synapses (connections between neurons) in young, rapidly developing brains. It is also clear that because true craftsmanship develops slowly it teaches planning, patience, and determination.

Richard Florida, author of a new book entitled “The Rise of the Creative Class,” suggests that the dominant driver of our current economy and society is personal creativity. Can such a thesis be reconciled with an increasingly automated and

computerized world? In a word, yes. Among the most creative and “craftsman-like” of our younger generation are those investing themselves in producing better hardware and software for our burgeoning supply of computers. Surf the Internet and you’ll see what I mean; abundant creativity is evident in the design of innumerable fourth-, fifth- (and later) generation web sites, and in all manner of software packages. For these next-generation cyber-craftsmen, the combination of increasing bandwidth and pixel density bodes very well indeed.

Craftsmanship can and does take many forms. In addition to my uncle and my father, my four brothers have each developed, over time, into craftsmen of various sorts. Two of them, like Dad, have nurtured mechanical and technical skills to great effect (with one of them being a part of this digital revolution), while the other two are highly valued as a guitarist and an oil painter, respectively. Me? All I can do is tell you about it, but then perhaps writing is a craft also.