

## DEFINITIONS AND DEFICIENCIES: OR, WHY I AM NOT AN ARTIST

Webster's Dictionary of the English Language in 1950 defines the word "craft" :

1. Power; also any art or device. [Obs.]

Now this is a curious beginning. How does power also equal art or device? And it certainly is obsolete – this craft – this power. There are undertones of magic and dishonesty.

Let us continue:

2. Cunning, art, or skill, in a bad sense, or applied to bad purposes; artifice; guile; skill or dexterity employed to effect purposes by deceit.

Are we getting anywhere yet? Does this ring a bell somewhere – why would we not sneer at craftsmanship? Smells of strategy, ulterior motives and duplicity.

3. Art; skill; dexterity in a particular manual occupation; hence, the occupation or employment itself; manual art; trade; specifically (with the definite article), freemasonry; as, brothers of the craft.

I am beginning to compile words associated with craft. Cunning, sly, astute, wily, insidious, politic, deceitful, subtle, shrewd, skillful, designing, artful, etc. But if we take the third definition and choose to call art our closest synonym, we are somewhere else. Experts arrive to declare what art is and what art isn't. Academies flourish, entire vocabularies begin to flower. Complications begin to set in.

However – if we read far enough, deep enough – Art, according to Webster’s (definition 5):

5. Cunning; artifice; as, animals practice art when opposed to their superiors in strength.

Now I like that definition. It compares the artist to a cornered rat. But Webster’s first I decidedly do not like.

1. The disposition or modification of things by human skill, to answer the purpose intended. In this sense art stands opposed to nature.

Its that opposed to nature theme that I find suspect. Otherwise the first definition says absolutely nothing except that art is human-made. OK so far.

Artifice is described in Webster’s as an “artful contrivance” and an “ingenious device” and the synonyms of artifice are: cheat, deception, deceit, finesse, ruse, stratagem, trick. A trick is crude, low, malicious; an artifice, fine, or as the word implies, artful. Artful deception.

Simple and honest Americans do not trust art. Just as we do not like lying and cheating we do not trust or respect those folks that make devices. James Thurber when reaching for a word to describe the most awful nightmare creature in *The Thirteen Clocks*, finally resorted to calling it a “mere device.”

A definition of Artificer:

2. One who makes or contrives; an inventor. “an artificer of fraud”  
—Milton.

Where does all this come from, this distrust of cunning and artifice? From simple plain folk? From those that speak for the folk? Politicians? Philosophers? We know that Plato in *The Republic* warned us against poets saying that they lied; and artificers and politicians are avowed and instinctual enemies. The former are defined by their cunning while the latter thrive by publicly eschewing all forms of deception.

Lets go back to definition five. Art is a human-made response when the human is opposed by superiors in strength. (Imagine that proverbial cornered rat, if you would.) This begins to sound like survival. This begins to sound like Real Life. This begins to sound like individual, unique, absolute survival response in the face of superior strength.

There is no greater 'superior strength' than the philistinism of the public example [pop-culture] – network television, big budget movies, best seller books – to provoke the individual response called "art: definition five." I am immediately reminded of all the artists that I know.

### ON CRAFT

In the 1883 edition of *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* the textual example for the definition of craft is:

1. A poem is the work of the poet; poesy is his skill or craft of making.  
—B. Johnson

This is a poet talking about craft and do we all know what Plato thought of poets? But we can continue without haste to the example for definition 2:

2. You have that crooked wisdom which is called craft, which is the sign of pusillanimity.  
—Hobbes

This is Hobbes the philosopher speaking. We cannot quarrel with his plain spokenness, his guileless truth saying. It is in the dictionary, it is in the language, it is in the American imagination. These are definitions!

Here we begin to catch the drift of our language – what we imply when we distinguish between a craftsman and a businessman or a scientist. Our platitudes, our wisdom, our homilies, teach us that in business, "Honesty is the best policy" and that a scientist is a verifier of truths. These men are not poets or artisans, these are honest and truthful men.

I am not sure what calls one to the crafts and (by definition) the arts. But it cannot be the definitions....

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