

'It's pretty, but is it Art?'

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The devil whispered behind the leaves, 'It's pretty, but is it Art?'

ALL MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE I have striven to avoid calling book-binding an art. Bookbinding is a craft or a trade and the study of its history is the province of historical bibliography, not of art history. This dogmatic position was somewhat shaken by my study of a variety of descriptions of bookbinding practice by binders and interested observers, dating mainly from the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,² where this craft is almost invariably called an art, sometimes, but by no means always, with the qualifying adjectives 'useful', 'mechanical', 'decorative', and in the early twentieth century even: 'fine'.

This led me to investigate the earlier meanings of the word art, from which it was clear that 'art' in the sense of 'fine art' is a comparatively late usage, with recorded examples dating from 1668 onwards. The earlier meaning, with examples recorded from c.1225 onwards, is a 'skill in doing anything as the result of knowledge and practice', or, for our purpose more apt: a 'skill in applying the principles of a special science; technical or professional skill', recorded from c.1300 onwards.³ The word craft, meaning 'skill, skillfulness', or, 'a branch of skilled work. An art, trade, or profession requiring special skill and knowledge, esp[ecially] a manual art, a handicraft', is considerably older and its first usage has been attributed to King Alfred.⁴

From the examples quoted in the complete *Oxford English Dictionary* it is clear that the words art and craft were used synonymously. However, it is interesting to see what earlier English dictionaries and encyclopaedias made of these words. With one exception, those eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century dictionaries and encyclopaedias that I have consulted,⁵ either do not list the word craft at all or have it only as meaning: fishing tackle, and small boat. Art is altogether a different story. Many of the eighteenth-century dictionaries repeat each other and several copy the definition of previous 'authorities' more or less verbatim. Therefore a few examples will suffice.

Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* (1728) is the first and probably the most

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useful source. It is also a work much copied or paraphrased in later dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Art is defined as ‘a Habit of the Mind prescribing Rules for the due Production of certain Effects.’ Arts can be divided into ‘active’, those that leave no product, and ‘factive’, those that leave something tangible. Quoting Bacon’s definition of art as ‘a proper Disposal of the Things of Nature by human Thought and Experience, so as to make them answer the design and Uses of Mankind’, Chambers opposes art and nature and sees art as ‘a certain System or Collection of Rules, Precepts and Inventions or Experiments, which being duly observ’d, make the Things a Man undertakes succeed, and render them advantageous and agreeable’. A further division leads to divine and human art, the latter further subdivided into civil, military, physical, metaphysical, philological and mercantile; to the last named of which belong the mechanical arts and manufactures. Another division of art proposes liberal and mechanical arts, the former being ‘noble and ingenious, worthy of being cultivated without any regard to Lucre arising from them’ [our fine arts], and the latter are ‘those wherein the Hand, and Body are more concern’d than the Mind; and which are chiefly cultivated for the sake of Profit they bring with them . . . [they] are popularly known by the name of *Trades*’. In the preface to his *Cyclopaedia*, Chambers further expands on the concepts of art and science, where they differ and where they may be touching, stressing the personal and moral aspects of art.

J. Barrow, *A new and universal dictionary* (1751),⁶ defines art as ‘a system of rules, which, being carefully observed, render undertakings successful, advantageous and agreeable’, not that far from Chambers, but more succinct. His division into liberal and mechanical arts and their description are very close to those in the 1728 *Cyclopaedia*. Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755) defines art as ‘1. The power of doing something not taught by nature and instinct . . . an habitual knowledge of certain rules and maxims, by which a man is governed and directed in his actions. 2. A science; as, the liberal *arts*. 3. A trade. 4. Artfulness; skill; dexterity.’ Owen’s *New and complete Dictionary* (1754) introduces in its preface a new aspect: ‘ARTS, in general, might be referred to the imagination, but we choose . . . to class them according to the various uses they are intended to serve.’ This work also quotes Bacon, but here as observing that ‘the arts which relate to the eye and ear, are accounted most liberal: the others being held in less repute, as approaching nearer to sensuality than magnificence’. The word art is simply defined as ‘a system of rules serving to facilitate the performing of certain actions; in which they stand opposed to science, or a system of speculative principles’, a nice

compact definition with shades of Chambers and Johnson, which is copied in T. H. Croker’s *Complete Dictionary* (1764). The latter, however, introduces two new concepts. In his preface Croker calls what we would now understand under fine arts, ‘arts of imitation’, and states of ‘the mechanic arts’ that they, ‘depending upon manual operation, and confined to a certain beaten track, are assigned over to those persons whom prejudice place in a lower class’, adding an element of snobbery about which the binders themselves in their manuals frequently complain.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1771), J. Cooke (1771, 2) and E. Middleton (1778) define art in the same way as Owen and Croker. G. S. Howard, *The new royal cyclopaedia* (1788) relies heavily on Chambers, but adds: ‘the *arts* which relate to the eye and the ear are accounted as most liberal, and usually called *fine arts* . . . at their height, the liberal *arts*; and when on the decline, the *arts* of luxury’. Here we see the modern, narrower usage of art as fine art in a dictionary all but a hundred years earlier than *OED* led us to believe.⁷ All these Dictionaries or Encyclopaedias also have entries under bookbinding,⁸ which vary from ‘the Art of *binding* or covering *Books*’ (Chambers) to ‘the Art of gathering, and sewing together the Sheets of a Book, and covering it with a Back’ (from D. De Coetlegon, *An universal history of arts and sciences* (London, 1745 onwards)), although Rees’s *Cyclopaedia* (1819) follows *The book of trades, or library of the useful arts* (London, 1804–5, pt III (1806)) in expanding this somewhat unsatisfactory definition to: ‘the art of sewing together the sheets of a book, and securing them with a back, and strong pasteboard sides, covered with leather &c.’ All refer to bookbinding as an art.

So much for the definition of art – and to a much lesser extent of bookbinding – in the dictionaries and encyclopaedias of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But how do the binders describe their own trade? The bookbinders’ manuals that I have consulted date from before 1840, as by then the development of bookbinding machinery was rapidly transforming a hand craft into a mechanised industry. However, as mechanization proceeded, a reaction, in England best epitomised in William Morris’s and T. J. Cobden-Sanderson’s Arts and Crafts movement, revived binding as a craft and, by the next century, some of the Designer Bookbinders again judged their craft also an art.⁹

English binders and amateurs of bookbinding were not as keen to produce written descriptions of their chosen subject as those in Germany and in France.¹⁰ The earliest surviving useful English description of bookbinding fills a section in G. Smith, *The laboratory or school of*



Fig. 1. A Paris binding by the *Atelier du relieur du roi*, c.1555. L. B. Alberti, *L'Architecture et art de bien bastir* (Paris, 1553). A Greek style binding of brown calf over wooden boards, tooled in gold. 352 (358) × 225 × 43 mm. British Library, Davis 396