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## Polysemic Lexicon: Exploring the Different Meanings of the term ‘Craft’

**Abstract.** In order to promote understanding among students, professionals, and researchers, this research attempts to raise awareness of the polysemic nature of the terminologies surrounding crafts.

Terms related to crafts, like skill, practice, workmanship, tradition, and heritage, are frequently used and expressed in an unclear manner. Furthermore, the term "craft" can refer to a variety of unique economic activities and transactions that fulfil a range of professional functions. The research has discovered evidence of this ambivalence in terminology through a review of the literature, in-person interactions with primary sources in the area, and observation of scientific panels and research groups. Design Education, Design Research and Design practitioners may find it helpful to be aware of this diversity. As a result, the study suggests a revision of these meanings for additional discussion, helping to create a more precise taxonomy that aims to collect useful information that is less dependent on a terminological viewpoint. The methodology comprises a series of semi-structured interviews with active designers, experts/researchers, and craftspeople and a systematized cross-referencing of terminology. Their statements were recorded and extrapolated to compare how they attribute different meanings to craft-related terminology and the way they limit and understand its boundaries, actors and qualities.

**Keywords:** Heritage Crafts, Knowledge Transfer, Craft Lexicon, Design Semantics, Design Research.

### 1 Introduction

The present research is part of ongoing doctoral research that aims to map and document contemporary practices in Portugal based on artisanal processes and specific local contexts that relate to design and architecture. The paper aims to provide an overview of various terms associated with crafts practices to raise awareness of the polysemic nature of terminologies around the subject. Therefore, the study presented in this paper focused on making explicit the polysemic nature of the terminology around Crafts studies, providing first-hand testimonies collected during the fieldwork and a critical literature overview.

What is the meaning of the word ‘craft’? This remains an open problem in academia. Craft is a term used in a social and institutional context that is generally alien to its academic or scientific conceptualisation; however, the subject is studied by design, anthropology, sociology, architecture, ethnography, and art history. Authors have brought up this issue, claiming ambivalence and semantic changes in the terminology for the term Craft [1-4].

In the Portuguese context, no strict concept in the sector has been unanimously established [5, 6] despite heritage crafts having gained significant attention from private

and public institutions. Crafts are promoted in multiple contexts [1] as they lead distinct economic processes and exchanges, serving different professional purposes. The status of folk art and crafts as *public categories* [6] means that the terms are used widely in non-academic publications<sup>1</sup>. If in the field of art and art history, there is a general lack of consensus in the literature regarding the definition of folk art and crafts [6]. In design research, this discussion is even scarcer. Crafts and other related terms such as artisan, maker, folk art, manufacturing, traditional, skill, and handicrafts are often employed and articulated with ambiguity. Therefore, carefully using terminology according to the idea to be conveyed is fundamental in clarifying the perspective at stake.

Frayling describes three main strands of craft activities: authors who identify with the Arts and Crafts movement tradition, others who identify with Industrial Design, and artisans who are mainly focused on perpetuating ancient craft practices [1]. Etymologically, ‘craft’ was synonymous with ‘art’ in English until the late 18th century. With the Industrial Revolution and the onset of mass production of objects, other meanings began to be associated with the word, such as handmade, ornamental, and utility [7]. The blurring of boundaries began in the post-war period. A contemporary designer-maker can work with traditional techniques, while the traditional craftsman can create one-off pieces and engage in mass production [4].

The scenario has since evolved as crafts are multidisciplinary — involving material, technological, cultural, social, economic and ecological aspects [8]. Shiner stated that the boundary between art and craft - defined as a set of disciplines - has disappeared [3]. For much of the 20th century, craft was still poorly regarded by the arts, but nowadays, craft as a practice can be understood as distinct from art - but no longer in a pejorative sense [3]. Craft is a relational term with no rigid boundaries and is an evolving field<sup>2</sup> [3]. More recently, Alvelos and Chatterjee [9] demonstrated that in the Portuguese context, specific terms have undergone processes of re-signification, rendering dominant definitions reductive, producing adverse effects on the perception of value related to workshop practices. The authors have suggested an expanded lexicon concerning traditional Portuguese creative activities in tune with an international scope.

## 2 Methodology

The collection of terminology was fed by a literature review and ongoing fieldwork. Interviews were conducted with creatives who work in the intersection between architecture, design, and/or traditional Portuguese industries. While we were conducting this series of exploratory interviews, it became evident that there is a considerable ambivalence between these domains. Observation occurred throughout the series of semi-structured interviews whenever possible at the interviewee's workplace or, if not, at a location chosen by the interviewee. This allowed us to minimise the impact of the researcher on the actions of the individuals being studied [10]. In Table 1, we present a summary of the interviews made during this study. The interviews did not raise the need to limit craft, architecture, and design as clearly defined fields, indicating that this issue is potentially theoretical or academic and has few practical implications.

An ethnographic approach was undertaken during the fieldwork. We wrote field notes and gathered a range of materials: seminar presentations, lectures, course assignments, and photographs. The interviews followed Spradley's use of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview structure [11]. During the interviews, different questions were addressed according to the profile of each interviewee. Although the article is in English, the set of interviews was conducted with Portuguese speakers and then translated into English by the authors. The following questions guided the analysis:

<sup>1</sup> Viegas (2010) cited in Restivo, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Shiner argued that we need to rethink the concept of Craft in the light of its relationship with Art and Design. In terms of philosophy, only a few authors attempt to define craft as we find it in art, according to Shiner.

- How do we clarify the Crafts terminology collected from the literature review and the one collected from practitioners and experts in the Portuguese context?
- How can the communication between those who study Crafts and those who practice them be improved?
- What are the most efficient ways to communicate the diversity of craft practices?

**Table 1.** Summary of the background information of the interviewee's selection. Source: Authors

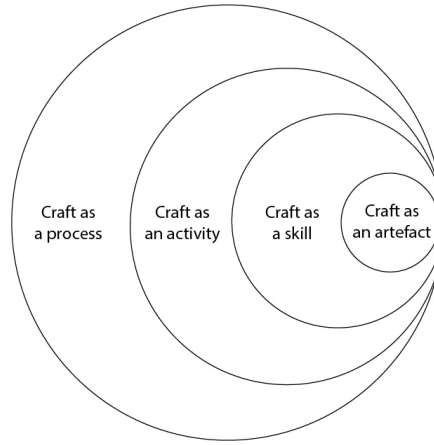
Name	Specific Domain	Group	Expertise	Education	Date
F.Burmester	Crafts	Craftsman	Woodwork	Design/Cabinet Making	28.04.2022
C.Esteves	Design	Designer	Weaving	Design	06.10.2022
P.Jervell	Architecture	Designer	Construction	Architecture	17.11.2022
N.Sarmento	Architecture	Expert	Curatorship	Restoration	22.12.2022
F.A.Fonseca	Architecture	Designer	Construction	Architecture	04.01.2023
J.Pombal	Crafts	Craftsman	Ceramic	Arts	04.01.2023
S.Baron	Design	Designer	Creative Direction	Industrial Design	12.01.2023
F. Almeida	Crafts	Expert	Curatorship	History of Art	13.01.2023

**Table 2.** Interviewees' classifications are based on the type of activity, whether it is directly linked to design, and whether their activities do not have clear boundaries between architecture, design, and heritage crafts, according to the reading of Larry Shiner (2012). Source: Authors

Name	Activity	Blurred Boundaries	Related to Design
Frederico Burmester	Artistic	•	•
Célia Esteves	Commercial	•	•
Pedro Jervell	Artistic	•	•
Francisco Adão da Fonseca	Artistic	•	•
Joaquim Pombal	Commercial	•	•
Sam Baron	Commercial	•	•
Felipa Almeida	Artistic	•	n.a.

### 3 Findings

The analysis revealed a variety of terms with ambivalent meanings. We divided the results into different "meaning categories" [12]. These emerged as different dimensions of the term craft, and we related them to the terminology we verified to be described in the literature and used in multiple instances during the observations and analysed interviews. We have opted to translate and transcribe collected testimonies that relate to the categories of our analysis to this section (Table 3).



**Fig. 1.** Four Dimensions of the word ‘Craft’. Source: Authors

**Table 3.** Classification of the interviewees' practices based on their testimonies and the meaning categories presented in this study. Source: Authors

Name	Produce Crafts as products	Practice Craft as a skill	Practice Craft as an activity	Practice Craft as a process
F. Burmester	•	•	•	•
C. Esteves	•	•	•	•
P. Jervell	•	•	•	•
N.Sarmiento	•	•	•	•
F. A. Fonseca	•	•	•	•
J. Pombal	•	•	•	•
S. Baron	•			•
F. Almeida	•			•

### 3.1 ‘Craft’ as an artefact or a product

The first most usual connotation of the term ‘craft’ is with a series of objects<sup>3</sup>. The words artefact, handmade, and handicraft are terms generally used relating to this meaning. The word is often suggestive of “ornamentation, decoration, the handmade, and folk art” [7]. The translation of the word ‘craft’ into Portuguese is not clearly defined, as it primarily refers to the manual production of objects. The Portuguese terms *artesanato*, *artefato*, or *ofício* are the most commonly used [6].

In ethnography, craft refers to a set of vernacular artefacts that relate to the social contexts from which they originate [6]. The word craft covers a range of utilitarian and artistic objects in different scales (Fig. 2). From a cultural and patrimonial point of view, craft means artefacts and traditional objects that store social, personal, and cultural memory and knowledge [13].

From an economic standpoint, craft often means trade or product [4]. Different institutional and educational narratives reflect the division between art artefacts or cultural products and artisans’ utilitarian products, especially regarding the commercial value of those artefacts.

<sup>3</sup> The Portuguese word that relates more closely to this meaning is *artesanato*.





**Fig. 2.** Craft as an artefact or a product. Joaquim Pombal Studio Visit, Leça do Balio, January 2023.



**Fig. 3.** Craft as a skill. Non-participant observation, Bancada 9 workshop, Porto, May 2022.

As stated by UNESCO definition, artisanal products are produced by artisans by hand or with the help of hand tools or mechanical means as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of the finished product [14]. However the proposed definition does not limit the scale of the production. Regarding the choice of raw materials, artisanal products should come from sustainable resources (it has opted not to mention the word local).

The second part of this description is very broad and has subjective meanings, allowing almost any type of artefact to be included within the above-mentioned parameters. It declares that "the special nature of craft products derives from their distinctive characteristics, which may be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally linked, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and meaningful".

In the Portuguese context, we find an equivalent term, “*artesanato*”, that covers this broad spectrum of artefacts and products [5]. Craft is not commonly associated with urban life and contemporary artistic expressions. It is traditionally associated with the rural material culture through an ethnographic narrative, perpetuated in the multiple local or regional museums created throughout the 20th century [6].

### 3.2 ‘Craft’ as a skill

This section explores the craft's technical dimension as a skill<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 3). The etymological meaning of the German word *kraft* is power, strength or skill<sup>5</sup>. The German word for skill, *fertigkeit*, derives from the word *fahrt*, which means ‘journey’ in English, and *fertig*, which means “completed, suggesting that skills are the result of a learning process”. Craft as a Process dimension will be addressed later in this article in the correspondent section.

Skill derives from the old Norse word *skil*, meaning discernment. The word can also be related to dexterity, ability, talent, and competence and can be defined as “the capability of doing something” [7].

In 1968, Pye described workmanship as “the formal skill of making things, the application of the technique to making by the exercise of care, judgment, and dexterity” [2]. Cleverly, he chose a term that does not include the expression ‘craft’ to clarify the practical ability to produce an artefact. We relate this meaning with the word workmanship as a formal skill in making things, especially in a way that makes them look good [15]. On the other hand, Pye defined the term technique as the knowledge to make things out of raw materials, being “what can be written about the methods of workmanship” [2]. He was radical to the point of stating that workmanship is design, justifying that it is difficult to say where workmanship and design end. Pye also indicated that each artisan's workmanship level can vary, depending on their practice<sup>6</sup>. Sennet considered technique “a cultural issue rather than a mindless procedure” [16].

The discussion about the need to re-introduce crafts as a skill in higher education is particularly relevant to Design Education. In Portugal, intellectual work was gradually separated from manual labour in terms of higher education institutions. In contemporary art, some institutions opt to assume that we are in what Krass called the “post-medium” era<sup>7</sup>. The post-disciplinary world devoted fewer resources to the development of particular skills, and this attitude has caused specific craft-related training in higher education institutions to disappear [17]. Kokko pointed out concerns about the excessive ‘academisation’ of higher education curricula, the emphasis on theoretical studies and the devaluation of the practical knowledge that is the basis of crafts skills [8]. The reality is that an increasing number of creative students pursue professional goals that require knowledge of craft and materials. These students are willing to embrace skill or mastery as an optional aspect of artistic practice.

One of the most common assumptions, especially in Portugal, where contemporary craft practices seem underdeveloped, is that *artesanato* (craft) must be grounded in tradition, folk culture and heritage. Until now, some practitioners have been highly mindful of the traditions to which they belong, while others have tried to cut themselves off entirely [1]. This still happens for commercial reasons, negative preconceptions about the craftsman's profession, or connotations of the inferior value of handicrafts with no artistic or author

4 The Portuguese words that relate to this meaning are *saber-fazer*, *competência*, *destreza*.

5 As consulted in [etymonline.com/word/craftsman](http://etymonline.com/word/craftsman).

6 “In the workmanship of risk, decisions are very often made by the workman which could have been made by the designer, and the workman may himself be the designer.” (...) “By that definition nothing is workmanship which a designer could alter by speaking or writing a word or two; and workmanship is the exercise of care plus judgment plus dexterity. These can be taught, but never simply by words. Example and practice are essential as well. It is no part of a designer's job to teach them, even though he may able to.” (Pye, 1968, p. 25)

7 Cited in Shiner 2012, pp.238-244.

connections as opposed to what the public calls art or design artefacts. Although there is tension in the dominant discourses about what is modern and what is traditional, the interviews indicate that makers are crossing boundaries between the traditional and the contemporary. They do not take the definition of a traditional craft to be strictly manual, even if the dominant attitude toward the industry is of opposition, still very much influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement [18].

*There is always that concern about doing more in less time. In that sense, why not introduce the machine where it is more accurate? I can then focus on other aspects where manual skills are needed and let the machine handle that task. (F. Burmester, in-person interview, April 28, 2022)*



**Fig. 4.** Craft as an activity. Joaquim Pombal Studio Visit, Leça do Balio, January 2023.

### 3.3 ‘Craft’ as a practice or an occupation

Craft as an action comes from the origin of the word and can be defined as a way of making or producing with care, skill or ingenuity. This meaning goes back to the Middle Ages[3]. Craft can be an occupation, trade, or activity requiring manual or mechanical dexterity or artistic skill<sup>8</sup>. We observed that some individuals see their craft as an occupation in the sense Pollanen describes it. Pollanen's paper focuses on the relationship between craft activity and well-being [19]. This occupation has a personal and specific meaning, and it is based on the person's constructed subjective experience, has a personal cultural meaning, and is made up of contextual qualities learned during their lifetime.

In this sense, a craft product is not seen as the end because the activity involves the individual's identity, and its motivation is complex and emotional, defined by a series of pre-set values. The interviewees of our study see their occupation as a way of life, giving them a sense of purpose, which is closely linked to their sense of well-being (Fig.4). When interviewed, Burmester and Pombal, artisans who pursued a long-term working career, referred to the need for a significant commitment to their craft, requiring an evolutionary and long-term learning activity.

<sup>8</sup> The Portuguese words that relate to this meaning is *ofício*.



### 3.4 'Craft' as a process

It is important to distinguish between craft as an activity or a practice (Figure 3) - attributed to a set of specialities or disciplines defined by materials and techniques like ceramics, pottery, basketry, weaving and woodwork) - and craft as a process (Figure 4) embedded in various practices [3]. Commonly, when the term is used with this meaning, it refers to traditional practices using ancestral techniques<sup>9</sup>.

Sennett defines craft as a generic process [16]. Glenn Adamson argues that craft is an artisanal process and a practice, using Wittgenstein's notion of a practice made up of a set of common assumptions that inform a way of making [3]. Shiner proposes to think of craft as a process embedded in a multiplicity of practices [3]. All the interviewees identified their practice within this notion. During the interviews, craft as a process was often related to an artistic notion and an ethical, local, and sustainable approach to their respective practices.

Shiner challenges the pre-notion that the artisanal process is characterized above all by the use of manuality, arguing that artisanal practice is defined by an intensive engagement with the nature of materials and a solid knowledge of materials and techniques. He showed how craft, as the name of a category of disciplines, only goes back to late nineteenth-century responses to industrial production and concludes that the boundary between art and craft, defined as a set of disciplines defined by materials and techniques, has completely disappeared [3].

Architectural design and construction are typically defined as a sequence with Design as the start and build as the final. Pye defined design as "what can be written" and craft as something linked to practice, to making something tangible. Burmester interview revealed the term Design attributed to the idealisation of an artefact:

*From the process, the idea, and the practice, something is lost, and something is gained. It transforms into something else entirely. It is never reconcilable. Something always changes between what you idealise and what is done.* (F. Burmester, in-person interview, April 28, 2022)



Fig. 5. Craft as a process. Fieldwork, Marinha Grande, April 2023.

<sup>9</sup> The Portuguese word that relates to this meaning is *vernacular*.

Pye described the ‘workmanship of risk’ as a process — in comparison with the workmanship of certainty that defines mass production — in which the quality of the result is, in essence, continually at risk during the process of producing an artefact [2]. In this process, the quality of the result is not predetermined but depends on the judgement, care and dexterity that the maker exercises as he works [2]. Stein uses the notion of craft as a process, making it a way to discover and experiment with material sensibility. With this sensibility, the material becomes the generator of form rather than simply a means of manifesting or translating predetermined ideas of form [20]. Sarmento and Jervell addressed this notion during their interview:

*(...) there is an action of the body in the matter and an interest in the matter. And at the same time, there is a certain contemplation. (...) That later, when all of this is channelled through architecture. It begins right there. You look at a project, you arrive at a territory, and the land, the resources of the land, and what can be there become interesting. Even before the design, before a volume that a person has in their head, there is this question: let's connect the body to the land. Let's explore what can be done here. After exploring, understand what the needs are and how this can be built. With all these technological learnings and this sense of texture, weight, and gravity included in understanding things, we start to build. (N. Sarmento, in-person interview, November 14, 2022)*

*We are undertaking many projects using this method/approach, which involves recovering and understanding the available raw materials. (P. Jervell, in-person interview, November 14, 2022)*

### 3.5 ‘Craft’ as knowledge

Craft knowledge falls within the definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage as defined by the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage in 2003 [21]. The concept is widely present in literature, institutional communications, and conversations with experts. It is defined by practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills that communities and groups recognize as cultural heritage.

According to this definition, intangible cultural heritage is passed down from generation to generation. It is, therefore, constantly recreated by communities in response to their contexts, their interaction with nature and their history [20]. Related to this concept and articulated with the word craft is the word "traditional", which frequently appears to indicate something static and crystallized, in a persistent dichotomy with contemporary practices.

Dormer identifies a series of prejudices about craft knowledge that mainly derive from the idea that craft is a mechanical activity without creative, subjective, and aesthetic expression by those who carry it out [22]. Craft knowledge derives from the crafts person's close knowledge of the material, the tools, and the processes [22].

Within this cultural and heritage framework, we prefer to adopt the definition of traditional as something that is part of a practice of oral transmission [23] that allows the past to be transported to the present and enables variations and constant metamorphosis [24].

Three types of knowledge to this meaning: the technique, as the knowledge of how to make devices and other things out of raw materials [2]; the technology, which consists of scientific knowledge and is an extension of the technique; and the workmanship or know-how, the formal skill of doing things, which is acquired through the practice of making continued over time.

Material knowledge can be acquired through continued practice over time. However, it is also a scientific domain that can be acquired and investigated by different areas of science. Craft knowledge can be expanded by gradually understanding aspects of a particular technology and mastering the physical properties of different materials. We argue

that craft knowledge is fundamental to a designer's practice. Sharing this knowledge is one of the aspects that gives meaning to co-creation between a designer and a craftsman.

*This tactile learning, the physical aspect of the material, is a form of education. This knowledge remains hidden in our universities and I believe, even at the AA [Architectural Association School of Architecture], where I was. There was never much discussion about this bodily knowledge, this bodily intelligence, which later becomes a collective intelligence. I think this is almost a discipline that should be explored more. Imagine putting a person to saw for a day. Putting a person to carve. (Pedro Jervell, in-person interview, November 14, 2022)*

*The craftsmanship itself provides you with a very interesting empowerment. The psychology of the craftsman is a completely capable and self-sufficient psychology. It is like having a ranger within a military universe. It is someone who knows, arrives, goes, gets things done, and does not need much. The craftsman has this psychology because they themselves build it through their hands and the work done through experience. They control and understand their machines. They know how to maintain their machines. They are familiar with the components. (Francisco Adão da Fonseca, in-person interview, December 22, 2022)*

Traditional techniques are based on oral transmission and continued practice [24], on what can be called a consensus of good practices between peers. Dormer defends that “shared criteria” are the basis of skill [22]. During the interviews, the underlying idea was that when a designer wants to do something that is not in line with a consensus perception of good work, a well-executed technique or a good finish, he destabilises that consensus, causing a certain strangeness or mistrust between the designer and the craftsman.

A significant proportion of an artefact quality result is in the hands of the craftsman, because there are different physical aspects that a designer entrusts to the craftsman that he cannot specify [2]. While agreeing with this consideration, Dormer emphasises that the designer depends on and relies on the quality of the craftsmanship and, therefore, needs to be confident in the craftsman's tacit knowledge [22].

When we interviewed creatives linked to architecture, they invariably mentioned that crafts linked to the vernacular tradition are essential to their activities. In specific practices in Portugal, the knowledge of how to make things based on ancestral techniques persists and is an essential human resource; however, it is often mentioned and observed that the technical and artistic knowledge of these crafts is in decline. The transmission of knowledge that was once passed from generation to generation is not being ensured and has been gradually lost in recent decades. During the interviews and observations, it was mentioned that, when facing a particular problem with their craft, the only solution is to go back and recover this knowledge from elderly artisans, who no longer work but can provide essential feedback.

## 4 Conclusions and Future Research

In this paper, we have shown that some terminologies related to crafts commonly used can have different meanings. The aim was to find and categorize these different meanings and point out the terminology generally used to designate them, contributing to clarifying different notions and dimensions of craft we found both in literature and our research context. We found several terms in English literature that do not have literal translations in our local context. However, the issue of the term ambivalence arises in the same way in the Portuguese language.

As craft is a multidisciplinary field, defining common ground for different narratives is one of the necessary steps to achieve mutual understanding between academia and practitioners. The questions about its boundaries, qualities, and actors related to craft need to be addressed because there are many consequences in terms of the problems craft

traditions face. Therefore, the terminology used has been identified as the most commonly described and used in multiple instances.

The five categories presented in this work correspond to five meanings or dimensions found for the word craft. They are essential to characterise the context of the research as they describe different aspects of the subject, depending on what we choose to distinguish and what can be related between them.

The results allow further discussion of the intersections between contemporary practices in the following domains: heritage crafts, design, art, architecture, and traditional industries, as they are directly linked with the nature of the research context.

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