

Online Maker Communities: Craft and Engagement with Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the spaces of engagement with cultural heritage afforded by online maker communities. We argue that engagements with heritage in maker spaces, online and offline, are influenced by a strong craft ethos, which is one of the main reasons why these communities emerge and is for many members the main motivation to join and contribute. This ethos contributes to the outline and basic mechanisms by which communities are shaped, and contributes to configuring hubs of learning and exchange which recall the traditional craft guilds of the past, whilst featuring as well contemporary attributes that are unique for the digital era. Involvement in ‘virtual guilds’ shapes distinctive engagements with craft-related cultural heritage in online spaces and stimulates offline engagements that move dynamically between transmission and creative appropriation in new craft, art or design products.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5. [Arts and Humanities]

General Terms

Human Factors.

Keywords

Maker movement, online maker communities, virtual guilds, unmediated heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION

Craft has always occupied a privileged position in our societies, at the intersection of social, cultural and economic dynamics. Craft objects are useful quotidian items, but can also be singular objects displayed in museums and galleries, valued for their high level of craftsmanship. The skill and aesthetics they embody can be monetised in economic value, but such objects can be studied as well to discover the techniques, materials and craftsmanship secrets that bear inestimable cultural and historical value. Crafts also reflect, embody and shape the social and cultural values, discourses, and developments that are prevalent in societies at given historical times. For Richard Sennett, author of ‘The

Craftsman’ [10], craftspeople have a crucial role in shaping culture, society and technology. Their work is a reflection of the social and cultural milieu from which it draws substance, but which it also influences and shapes. Techniques and skills particular to a craft tradition are part of a society’s or community’s intangible cultural heritage. Likewise, the complex patterns, motifs and themes imprinted, embroidered or otherwise marked on craft objects contain complex symbols and cultural meanings, which can reveal (hidden) histories and identities.

The relationship between craft and cultural heritage appears therefore to be complex and multifaceted. In recent years, it has gained in complexity through the emergence of the maker movement. With roots in the Arts and Crafts movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the maker movement embraces similar ethical and philosophical principles: a rejection of mass production and consumerism, a reclaiming of uniqueness, individuality and the handmade, along with the autonomy, empowerment and distinction these can confer upon individuals and societies. At the same time, what makes the contemporary maker movement an unprecedented phenomenon is the way it has embraced digital technology to support, augment or completely transform making processes or ways of engagement with making and the handmade as maker and consumer. Hundreds of online maker communities have emerged around different traditional and digital craft practices. These communities are founded and function following self-organising principles, driven by members’ interests and passions. They grow organically and often develop to include many thousands of affectionate members and contributors, often spanning large geographical distances. Their cumulated potential to generate new premises for engaging with heritage as co-creators and participatory audiences is huge and still untapped. For example, in Romania, what started less than ten years ago as an interest in heritage arts and crafts, and the application of ethnic patterns and motifs to a wide array of contemporary designs – from fashion to architecture – developed into a nation-wide movement for finding new ways of engagement with traditional identity, values and cultural productions. Facebook alone is host to dozens of groups of knitters, crocheters, makers and designers, both professional and amateur, who post their works, exchange resources, learn new or forgotten techniques and even sell their products.

This paper examines the spaces of engagement with cultural heritage afforded by online maker communities. We focus on maker communities that engage with some form of craft that involves direct hand making intervention with physical materials such as wood or clay, therefore excluding digital crafts. To situate our observations in the context of a specific craft area, examples are provided that come from communities of weavers, knitters and crocheters. We argue that engagements with heritage in maker

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spaces are influenced by a strong craft ethos, which is one of the main reasons why these communities emerge and is for many members the main motivation to join and contribute. This ethos contributes to the outline and basic mechanisms by which maker communities are shaped. These recall the traditional craft guilds of the past, but also feature contemporary attributes that are unique for the digital era. Involvement in what are called ‘virtual guilds’ [1] shapes distinctive engagements with craft-related cultural heritage, which move dynamically between *transmission*, dwelling on faithfulness to past forms, and *creative appropriation*, residing on the transformation and integration of past forms in novel expressions.

2. METHODOLOGY

The paper draws upon research conducted in the frame of the European project RICHES (Renewal, Innovation and Change: Heritage and European Society), which examines the context of change for European cultural heritage, largely due to the advent of digital technology, and the opportunities opened up by using cultural heritage for social and economic development. The project included a strand of research on crafts, the maker movement and online maker communities. The study was conducted by means of desk research, online ethnography, an online survey and interviews with makers and designer makers in the UK and Romania, and the founder of an online maker community. The online ethnography focused on maker communities that promote both contemporary and heritage crafts. Contemporary crafts are associated with the work of contemporary makers and designer makers, drawing on original designs and more closely associated with fine arts. Their value often lies in originality or uniqueness, derived from the designer maker’s artistic intervention. Traditional crafts are, on the contrary, operating from a creative space that draws directly on cultural heritage, applying inherited techniques and designs. Authenticity - referring to the capacity of contemporary creations to recall, reproduce or re-enact techniques, patterns, motifs or themes from the past - is the trademark of traditional crafts. However, in practice the lines of distinction between contemporary and heritage crafts are blurred, especially as contemporary crafts take inspiration for designs, or adopt techniques from traditional or heritage crafts [13]. The specific examples chosen in this paper to illustrate the argument are taken from online communities of weavers, knitters and crocheters.

3. THE MAKER MOVEMENT AND ONLINE MAKER COMMUNITIES

“Like the Arts and Crafts movement—a mélange of back-to-the-land simplifiers, socialists, anarchists, and tweedy art connoisseurs—the makers are a diverse bunch. They include 3-D-printing enthusiasts who like making their own toys, instruments, and weapons; tinkerers and mechanics who like to customize household objects by outfitting them with sensors and Internet connectivity; and appreciators of craft who prefer to design their own objects and then have them manufactured on demand.” [7]

The maker movement has its roots in the Arts and Crafts movement, which flourished at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, and was based on aesthetics, craft and the hand made. It represented a rejection of the machine and was critical of mass production and shoddy goods but it was also based on a philosophy of wholeness, autonomy for the worker as artisan and pure craftsmanship in making. However, the movement was replete with contradictions and the paradox was

that the production of beautiful handmade goods was time-consuming and resulted in objects that only few could afford. The rejection of technology and the economic aspects of the Arts and Crafts movement were factors that contributed to its decline [2,8].

The 1960s witnessed a resurgence of the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement as a counterculture to mainstream mass consumerism and as a political act in defying authority. Based on a philosophy of self-sufficiency and making things for yourself, it developed into a DIY culture. The Whole Earth Catalog published in 1968 by Stewart Brand gave advice on all aspects of an alternative lifestyle and making, such as how to build your own house and grow your own food to empower the individual. But this was not just about the hand made. The difference was that it embraced the new technologies available at that time. In, 1968, however, nor the internet nor computers were accessible yet. Later, with the development of the internet, new ways for providing and exchanging information have emerged. For example, Kevin Kelly set up the blog *Cool Tools: A Catalog of Possibilities*, which continued the first catalogue’s philosophy of making things for yourself. The new catalogue recommends the best and cheapest tools and resources available for making, from hand tools to books, machines, software, and maps (see [6]).

The term ‘maker’ acquired new dimensions too, it became expansive and democratic. It can since include cooks who create and make food, making one’s own beer or wine, making a musical instrument or digital robot, to all aspects of needlework.

“Broadly, a maker is someone who derives identity and meaning from the act of creation” [4].

The contemporary maker movement is about the individual, the self-educated, about building up autonomy and power through a do-it-yourself ethic. In 2013 Mark Hatch published *The Maker Movement Manifesto* which states:

“Making is fundamental to what it means to be human. We must make, create, and express ourselves to feel whole. There is something unique about making physical things. Things we make are like little pieces of us and seem to embody portions of our soul” [5].

According to Morozov, makers are the new hackers who defy authority to do things their own way, *“a hacker takes nothing as given, everything is worth creatively fiddling with, and the variety which proceeds from that enriches the adaptivity, resilience, and delight of us all”* (Stewart Brand quoted in [7]).

Digital technology has had an impact on the emergence of the maker movement today. It has revolutionised communication and has transformed ways of networking and collaboration resulting in new relationships and new ways of working. The use of email, blogs and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Flickr, has allowed makers to develop and connect with each other in a global network of online maker communities. The main outcome of this is an increased possibility for networking and connecting, which provides new opportunities for making, as described by David Gauntlett:

“Making is connecting because you have to connect things together (materials, ideas, or both) to make something new; Making is connecting because acts of creativity usually involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with other people; And making is connecting because through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environments.” [3].

4. ENGAGEMENT WITH CULTURAL HERITAGE IN MAKER SPACES

Drawing on the research conducted in the frame of the RICHES project, these sections map engagements with cultural heritage in online maker spaces, as well as offline engagements stimulated by interaction in online communities. ‘Maker spaces’ refer herein to mostly virtual but also blended online and offline hubs in which makers interact, exchange resources, develop their skills and support their making practice drawing on the support of the wider community of peers.

4.1 Virtual guilds of weavers, knitters and crocheters

Traditional craft guilds were organised based on the master-apprentice model, by which experienced craftspeople passed on knowledge and skills to apprentices. Contemporary online maker communities retain some of these features: they are driven by members’ interest in a craft, and in learning and perfecting one’s skill. At the same time, the master-apprentice model is replaced by a more egalitarian one, thriving on peer to peer exchanges and learning. While online communities do feature hierarchies, for instance administrators and lead or senior members, in practice exchanges and learning happen mostly horizontally. Learning processes in these communities reside less in the passage of knowledge from seniors, and more in tapping into collective knowledge and expertise [1].

Focusing on the craft of weaving, knitting and crocheting, a number of online communities emerged using dedicated platforms, or as groups on proprietary social media platforms such as Pinterest and Facebook. *Ravelry*, founded by Casey and Jessica Forbes in 2007, is a social networking website specifically for knitters, crocheters, designers, spinners, weavers and dyers to keep track of their yarn, tools, project and pattern information, and look to others for ideas and inspiration. “*The content here is all user-driven; we as a community make the site what it is.*” (ravelry.com). The community has almost five million registered members. Whilst Ravelry is among the largest maker communities, many more smaller ones are active on social media. They typically number from the order of hundreds to thousands of members, though some arrive to include several tens of thousands. Some focus on particular areas of craft, or have a clear connection with cultural heritage. For instance, in Romania there are at least four Facebook communities brought together by the interest in stitching traditional richly embroidered Romanian blouses, called *ie*.

Maker communities are inclusive and open. Craft enthusiasts and makers of any age and level are invited to join. *Stitch 'n Bitch* is an online website where knitters and crocheters can start up knitting groups in physical spaces such as cafes, clubs and pubs and work on their knitting or crochet projects (stitchnbitch.org). It was founded by Debbie Stoller, the co-founder and editor-in-chief of the feminist magazine *Bust* in New York in 1999 due to her passion for knitting and her concern to teach and pass on skills to a new generation of knitters. In an interview, Stoller stated that the motivation to join is diverse and that there is not one reason why people join *Stitch 'n Bitch* groups: some join for social reasons, as an artistic expression or as a political act in reclaiming women’s work in a public space. However, she suggested that one of the main reasons people joined groups was due to their love and passion for knitting. As a feminist, it was important for Stoller that men were included and she stated that there were some all-male knitting groups as well as mixed groups even if they are in

the minority (Interview with Debbie Stoller, 11/02/2015; see also [11]).

Members’ activities in online maker communities are generally oriented towards exchanges that seek to perfect one’s own making practice while contributing to shaping the practice of the others. Activities generally focus on or combine one of the following:

- Sharing information: the kinds of information that can be shared are very diverse. For weavers, knitters, and crocheters, this can range from patterns, meanings of patterns and motives, to tools, techniques, and tutorials. Information can also be shared that regards offline events and activities.
- Sharing progress on one’s own practice: members post works in progress or finished items, for instance crochets or knitted clothes.
- Asking expert opinion or advice: members often consult the others for advice, or can stimulate discussions around issues of interest where diverse opinions are sought.
- Offering advice, support, comments and feedback: this is done usually by comments and posts which engage with the work of others or in answer to ideas or questions posted by other members.

Engagements with cultural heritage are nestled amongst these activities, and they span both online and offline spheres. Some of these engagements are purposeful acts of transmission, while in others aspects of cultural heritage are integrated to create new forms. The following section comments on how a craft ethos shapes these engagements.

4.2 Engaging with cultural heritage between transmission and creative appropriation

Cultural heritage is defined herein as a *dynamic* phenomenon “...an iterative, continuous process which is concerned with contemporary ‘living cultures’ that may reinterpret and recreate their culture and can play a vital co-creative and participatory role in the expression, production and consumption of culture. Cultural Heritage reinforces a group’s ‘culture’, their way of life.” [9]. Makers’ engagements with cultural heritage online and offline encompass both intangible heritage (e.g. skills, techniques of making, meanings of patterns and motives) and tangible heritage (e.g. vintage craft objects, tools used for traditional crafts which are considered now part of heritage).

At a first level, maker communities have contributed to a resurgence of interest in craft and the handmade as a contemporary practice. The spark is often situated in online hubs, however the power of these groups resides in the links forged with real life practices. They may support a maker’s craft practice, or also drive members exchanges and interactions in face to face encounters. In responding to the question why the interest in ‘handmade’ knitting in an era of mass manufacturing, Debbie Stoller, founder of *Stitch n’ Bitch*, gave three reasons: Firstly early feminists rebelled against handmade crafts associated with the home and domestic sphere, and hand-crafts such as knitting were undervalued due to the fact that it was work done by women. Debbie, an academic, author and knitter admitted to being a ‘closet crafter’ who had previously kept her knitting as a secret from fellow academics. In the mid-1990s the feminist movement

was concerned with a re-think on words relating to women and Debbie reclaimed the word ‘bitch’ as well as revaluing and reclaiming the practice of hand-knitting in a public sphere. Secondly, for some it was a rebellion against corporate consumer culture and the impact on the environment as well as the humanitarian impact of low pay and working conditions in the third world. Thirdly, in the late 1990s knitwear became fashionable but sometimes unaffordable even though these were simple designs that could be hand-knitted: “*In a culture of making you could make your own clothes and knit your own culture.*” (Interview with Debbie Stoller interview, 11/02/2015).

Apart from a resurgence of interest in crafts and the handmade, maker communities afford a variety of expressive engagements with cultural heritage. In particular, we found that cultural heritage engagements are influenced by a *craft ethos*, which denotes “*a conflation of values, beliefs, culture and aspirations, underpinned by developing technologies*” [12]. This ethos finds expression in making, appropriating heritage in one’s own creative practice. In analysing these practices, we found that creative expressions could range between two poles, one associated more with heritage crafts, favouring authenticity and faithfulness to traditional forms. In making, replication and imitation are valued over personal creative expression. The second is driving engagements in which heritage is creatively appropriated in novel forms. *Appropriation* refers to ‘making it one’s own’. *Creative appropriation* encompasses craft practices in which cultural heritage is integrated, interpreted, transformed and made into something new. This ethos is rooted in personal expression, finds value in how the maker is able to imprint their personal touch on the object.

These two drives are seldom found in pure forms in the activities accommodated in online maker communities. Most often, practices are mixed and blend past with new forms, under the maker’s personal approach. Yet these drives can create different premises for how makers interact with and impact upon cultural heritage. Makers animated by a traditional craft ethos situate themselves in a socio-cultural environment from which s/he often draws techniques, models, patterns, ideas. Craft work is a means to carry forward and enhance the value of that tradition. This does not mean that only faithful reproductions are allowed, nor that there is no space for personal creativity. Yet maintaining a link of continuity with the past has a higher value. Several online communities we studied appear to be animated by this ethos. For instance, in the Facebook community ‘Transylvania stitches ie’ (N. *ie* - Traditional Romanian blouse) brings together both professional and amateur craftspeople, as well as users interested in the making practices used traditionally in Romania to create garments. The *ie* Romanian blouse is an iconic garment, which features meaningful patterns and motives in its rich embroidery. These patterns are associated with the culture and traditions of different cultural regions of Romania, and connoisseurs are able to tell the provenance of a blouse by analysing its embroidery.

The members of the ‘*Transylvania stitches ie*’ community are brought together by a keen interest in reviving the tradition of stitching, which was once a general pastime in Romanian households and is now becoming increasingly rare. Activities are mostly oriented towards supporting learning and skills transmission such as sharing tutorials, techniques, or traditional patterns. There is as well a pronounced vibe to transmit and safeguard both intangible and tangible forms of cultural heritage. Some members share resources about the meanings of cultural

motives and themes, techniques and patterns they discovered in their scouting for traditional objects. Offline activities are particularly intense and involve looking for, collecting and restoring tangible heritage items such as rare vintage garments. Some members proudly post images of embroidery, blouses, skirts and carpets found in the attic of their forefathers or by scouting in fairs and exhibitions. In a similar vein, a Facebook group dedicated to weaving and Romanian weaving techniques has close to 2,000 members sharing an interest in a craft which is almost disappearing. Members share ideas for weaving, tips and techniques, or pictures of traditional weaving looms that they are discovering and restoring.

Underpinning the engagements with cultural heritage of these communities are ideas of transmission, safeguarding, collecting, and restoring. The second drive identified favours, on the other hand, personal expression and creativity, where cultural forms can be either used for inspiration or integrated as basis to come up with something completely new. These creative engagements are wide-encompassing and their major impacts are situated in the offline rather than the online sphere. The reinvention of tradition and folk art in contemporary acts of expression is a trend which in recent years was manifested across many different domains, from fashion to architecture, performance, and music. While this trend took as well a trajectory of its own, dissociate from online communities, its unprecedented vigour has much to owe to the power of digital technologies to connect people with similar interests and give them the tools to materialise their interests, share their creations, and inspire similar creative practices. These acts gave a new aura to cultural heritage, a quality of liveness and contemporary appeal which brought it back in the main city squares and citizen houses. For example, for her collection ‘Heritage’, Romanian fashion designer Sandra Galan used precious vintage fabrics embroidered with gold or silver thread, coming from traditional Romanian skirts, and featuring intricate designs and embroidery (Figure 1).

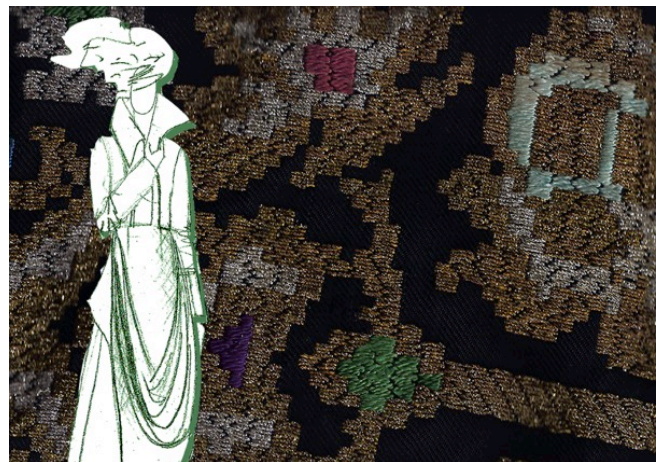


Figure 1. Sketch from the creative process of Romanian fashion designer Sandra Galan, over a fragment of a vintage Romanian skirt. Fashion collection *Heritage*. Source: Sandra Galan.

Sandra Galan comments on how she integrated vintage fabrics in her creation: “*I fell in love with the traditional Romanian skirts (‘fota’). I first found several treasures – this is how I call them – in a barely lighted, dusty boutique, and I realised I found a treasure, quite literally. And I just had this idea, I realised this is what I wanted to do for my degree. And I started*

hunting them, I made a stock of old skirts, especially from the area of Muscel. I have selected the skirts of Muscel, they are embroidered with gold and silver thread, and most have around 100 years old. We are talking about pieces that were expensive also 100 years ago, they were worn for weddings, special occasions, they were left to daughters as a dowry.” (Interview with Sandra Galan, 16/12/2014)

Sandra Galan integrated the precious materials in her creative process, which draws inspiration from the fabric. The collection was launched in 2008, at a time when the folk trend in contemporary fashion was peaking up in Romania, and contributed to generating a rising demand in similar creations featuring ethnic patterns or vintage embroidered fabrics.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper provided a reflection on how online maker communities spur new ways of engagement with cultural heritage driven by members' interests and passion, and closely associated with their making practice. A high number of online maker communities emerged in recent years, which contributed to a resurgence of interest in making, recovering often forgotten and endangered skills, techniques, and patterns, and repositioning crafts such as weaving, knitting and crocheting as contemporary practices. While the impetus for maker communities is often found online, the impacts of these practices are not reduced to the online sphere. Makers meet to exchange resources, opinions, or just work in the company of others. Some also become involved in collecting, restoring, displaying or manipulating cultural heritage objects such as vintage garments or old making tools such as weaving looms. We suggested that underpinning these engagements is a craft ethos, which finds value in making, hands on engagement, and transformation in contemporary forms of expression. Cultural heritage becomes a rich source of creativity and inspiration for makers, who contribute at the same time to conferring upon it a quality of liveness.

Making as practice is always transformative for cultural heritage. Yet, in analyzing how makers engage with heritage we noticed that makers' practice could be animated by different drives, which influence the extent to which the past is remodeled and transformed in contemporary interpretations. At one pole, some makers aim to revive and link to past forms of expression, revive techniques, recover forgotten skills and the cultural meanings imprinted, embroidered or otherwise featured on craft objects. At the other pole, makers use heritage as a source of inspiration, or integrate it in completely new creations, used in a wide range of fields, from fashion to architecture.

Activities in maker communities or around them emerge and thrive as unmediated practices. Not only are cultural institutions mostly absent from these practices, but members may even be unaware that their work can be in any way supported, inspired or driven by memory institutions such as museums engaging with the same content and themes. We propose as well that these communities present a potential - still under-exploited - for

cultural heritage institutions to revise their strategies of user engagement and consider connecting to and proposing activities that link to maker spaces.

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