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An apprenticeship in Denmark

Last spring, I attended a conference on apprenticeship where craftsmen and educators met to discuss the problems of learning a skilled craft today. I gave a paper on my own experiences as an apprentice in Copenhagen, which I started when I was just 13 years old.

The educational system was quite different from today in that most students finished school after the seventh grade. At that time classes were held six days a week, and the summer vacation was only six weeks, so the school year was about 240 days against the 180 days we have here. I was not very interested in academics, and the schools then, as now, weren't very interested in practical subjects. They were preparing students for college. After the seventh grade, I didn't know what I wanted to do. My father was a silversmith and an excellent craftsman. We had a lot of silver that had to be polished, which was usually my job and I did not enjoy it, so I was 100% sure I did not want to be a silversmith. But I had always worked with wood, so my father asked me if I wanted to apprentice with a cabinetmaker. I had to do something, so I said yes. It was quite by accident, but I am very happy for it today—it was the best thing that could have happened to me. It was a rough life, but when you were finished you had an excellent understanding about wood as a material, its strengths and limitations, and how to put it together. After finishing my apprenticeship and working as a journeyman for several years, I realized that I would have to go back to college. And so, when I was about 25, I did return to college and later to the School for Interior Architecture.

When I began, the master and apprentice signed a five-year contract, which was binding after a three-month trial. The salary was about \$1 a week, plus a lot of slapping if you weren't working hard all the time. The master also paid for medical insurance and tuition for the technical night school where drawing and knowledge of the material were taught.

The work day for journeymen was from 7 AM to 4 PM, six days a week. But the apprentice had to be there a half-hour early to start the wood fire, so the shop and the hot glue would be warm when the journeymen arrived. After the journeymen went home, the apprentice had to clean the shop and lay the fire for the next morning, which usually took about an hour—if he did not get into a fistfight with some of the other apprentices who weren't doing their share of the work. Usually the oldest apprentice was boss, if he was physically strong enough to stand his ground. The youngest apprentice got all the dirty work and ran errands for the journeymen, so during the first year he did not learn much except fistfighting and being persistent. After work we had to rush home, clean up and eat to be on time for night school, which was from 7 PM to 9 PM five days a week, except in mid-summer. Being that young and working that hard, you could stand on your feet and sleep whenever you got a chance.

I remember my first day as an apprentice. I was wearing a

pink shirt and a pair of jodhpurs, and my mother made sure I was washed all over and my hair was neatly combed. I had a new apron with a pocket for a ruler and one for a pencil, both filled. I was very small for my age, so when I was assigned a workbench it was too high. A platform was built so I could reach the bench. The first two or three days, nobody paid any attention to me. So I started making a knife box and was very happy until the master asked me to go to the hardware store. Couldn't he see that I was busy? I told him I was sorry, but I did not have the time—I was making a knife box for my mother. That was a big mistake. He explained very thoroughly who was the master and who was the apprentice.

As my first job, I was introduced to a big pile of mahogany with bark on all the edges, which had to be ripped, jointed and glued together, then flattened and planed to thickness and width, cut to length, and all the edges molded. Everything had to be done by hand. It took about three months. At first my arms hurt so much I could hardly scratch, but after a while I got used to it and developed some arm and shoulder muscles, which came in handy in arguments with the other apprentices. When I was finished I knew how to handle a saw and a plane and how to sharpen both.

The first couple of years I hated every minute and was planning to run away, which, thank heavens, never happened. Today I am very happy I stuck it out, and if I had to do it over again I would. You quickly learn to take care of yourself and stand your own ground, and to put in an honest day's work. I did not learn much about design, except what could be picked up from the pieces made in the shop. But that was as it should be—I can't see how people can design anything if they don't know the material.

In the fifth year the apprentice had to make a journeyman's piece, which was usually not of his own design. First, he went to the school for three days to make a complete set of drawings under strict supervision. The drawings were judged and graded, then the apprentice went back to the shop to build the piece. All the pieces had to be kept around the bench while he worked, and an inspector might walk in at any time to see that nobody was helping him.

Then the apprentices in all the trades who were graduating that year brought their finished work to the town hall, where it was judged and exhibited to the public. The jurors were usually architects, masters from the guild and a representative, in my case, from the cabinetmakers' union. The judging was done very carefully. In the case of furniture, each judge had a mirror on wheels with a long handle so he could see the bottom of the piece. If there were any drawers the same size, the judge might shift them around and turn them upside-down and still they had to fit perfectly.

If for some reason the journeyman's piece did not pass, the case would be taken to court. Several of the journeymen who had worked in the same shop would have to appear, along with the apprentice and the master. If it was found that it was the master's fault, the apprentice would be sent to another shop for whatever time the judge thought necessary to complete his education. The original master would have to pay the apprentice a journeyman's salary while he was completing his education. If it was proven that all the potentials for learning had been present at the shop, the apprentice had to pay for the rest of his education himself. So there was a good guarantee that the apprentice became a skilled workman.

There are a lot of reasons why a system like this would not

work today. First, when a student finishes high school he is about 18 years old and usually not willing to sign a contract for five years. Also, the Labor Relations Board would insist that the apprentice be paid the minimum wage. I think five years was too long and four would be enough, but I would never take any apprentice for less than four years. In the first year or two the master, if he is honest and not just looking for cheap sanding labor, would have to spend a lot of time with his apprentice plus pay for the materials the apprentice ruined. So the first year or two are usually quite a loss to the master. The third year the apprentice might be able to pay his own way, and in the fourth year he might begin to pay back what the education had cost the master. So some form of contract is necessary to make sure the apprentice doesn't walk out after the first year.

Today we seem to have too many over-educated people and not enough jobs to go around. I get a lot of letters, phone calls and people coming to see me who have a very high college degree but have found that they do not want to continue in the career for which they were educated. Many would be willing to work for nothing as apprentices. But they quickly discover that few craftsmen can afford to take on an apprentice, especially one who is likely to leave after one year. A few colleges have started apprenticeship or intern programs, and many universities have added a craft program to their curriculum ("Woodworking Schools," Spring '77, pp. 62-63 and Summer '78, p. 83).

Yet there is a great need for highly skilled craftsmen, not so much for designer/craftsmen, but for people who enjoy and are proud of making a beautiful thing even if they did not design it themselves. There are very few places today where a person can learn a skilled trade. I think that some kind of apprenticeship program is needed for these people. And this doesn't mean that a person going through such a program couldn't later become a designer/craftsman.

One way an apprenticeship program could work in our society would be for the apprentice to pay a small tuition while learning, and the time might be cut to two years if everything he makes belongs to the master and is of the master's design. To guide an apprentice to a master capable of training him, some organization like the American Crafts Council might inspect the shops that wish to start a program. The qualified shops could be given certificates. A book of guidelines for apprentices, listing all the certified shops, could be made available and kept up to date.

As I write I realize that this is not a new idea, but actually the way the old craft and art schools started. An established artist or craftsman would take in apprentices, who usually lived with him and did a lot of labor to pay for their keep and education—in effect, tuition. Sometimes a master would accept too many apprentices and would have to hire a book-keeper or administrator to keep track. The thing would grow, more administrators would be added, but the master was still the teacher and the backbone of the program. Out of that grew what today we call schools.

The conference I attended last spring was held at the State University of New York at Purchase, sponsored by the American Crafts Council and the Daniel Clark Foundation. The foundation, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, plans next year to publish the proceedings in a book. I don't think they solved the problems, but they might start some people thinking. □