

cultural heritage as an important element based on which the principles of local and regional identity can be formed.

Daniel Drápala

*(Department of European Ethnology,
Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno)*

THE “MATERIAL LANGUAGE: TRADITIONAL CRAFT TECHNIQUES THAT MAY SALVAGE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND CURRENT LIFESTYLE” PROJECT: PRESENTING FINDINGS FROM QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Research projects in the humanities in the Czech Republic are funded from several different sources. One significant grant provider is the Ministry of Culture: its subsidy programmes include, among others, the Programme for the Promotion of Applied Research and Experimental Development of National and Cultural Identity for 2011-2015 (NAKI I) and NAKI II for 2016-2022. The aim of the programme is to support projects in applied research and development focusing on preserving the values of cultural heritage and national cultural development while making them more accessible to the general public. The duration of supported projects ranges from three to five years. Grants are intended exclusively for research organizations. A NAKI II-funded project is currently being carried out by the Institute of Ethnology of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, Prague, with the following title: Material Language: Traditional Techniques That May Salvage Cultural Heritage and Current Lifestyle (2018-2020). The project consists of qualitative empirical research conducted in the Czech Republic. The objectives of the qualitative research comprise the following: 1) identifying the causes and factors that are at the source of the transmission, modification, and/or extinction of craft techniques; 2) describing, analysing, and

interpreting the situation currently prevailing in attitudes towards craft technique protection and preservation; 3) defining barriers that prevent passing of know-how and technological procedures to new generations; and 4) defining possible resources (human, institutional, legislative) that can contribute to the preservation of craft techniques and even to their further development.

The sample consisted of craftsmen and restorers who specialize in the following crafts: stove-fitting, parquetry, varnishing, gilding, fine woodworking and locksmithing, weaving and upholstery, woodcarving, plastering, and glass cutting. The respondents were selected using snowball sampling, that is, new subjects were recruited through referrals from existing respondents. Snowball sampling was chosen because craftsmen are a specific and rather small group whose members are difficult to identify and address. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that gave respondents ample space for unrestricted and open answers, while interviewers adhered to predefined spheres of inter-

est. The duration of interviews was adjusted to individual oral testimonies and the degree of openness of each respondent. The questions asked were divided into several categories and topics that were identical for all the respondents, which allowed for meeting the predefined objectives of a qualitative survey and for capturing developmental changes in arts and crafts from 1989 up to present.

The qualitative research that was carried out among craftsmen and restorers allowed for conducting a SWOT analysis aimed at identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the situation that arts and crafts currently face. What we consider strengths are the craftsmen's endeavours to adhere to traditional technological procedures, their efforts to work with original materials, their emphasis on having a personal relationship with their occupations, their work ethic and motivation to do their job, and their rich experience and professional know-how. Weaknesses include the interruption of the historic continuity of craft technology transmission, limitations linked with the selection of original materials,



Talent, dexterity, and manual skills are essential. Photo: Martin Frouz

decreasing interest in expanding professional qualifications, and the low degree of promotion and distribution of artefacts at the level of individual craftsmen. What we consider a negative trend is the attitude that local authorities have towards local crafts, an absence of a distribution network for artefacts, a limited offer of relevant education and quality training in the sphere of arts and crafts in the Czech education system, and the young generation's weak interest in carrying on crafts due to low financial remuneration and changes in lifestyle. Another factor that adversely affects the development of arts and crafts is the wide range of competitive products from East-European countries that compromise the quality and prestige of traditional handicrafts, the low administrative literacy of Czech craftsmen, and their resignation concerning the use of grants and subsidies. Other factors that are far from being positive are the decrease in craftsmen's interest in membership in associations and societies and their lack of confidence in the basic functions of such institutions.

What can be considered possible opportunities for preserving arts and crafts and ensuring their further development are new development trends that take into account the significance of cultural heritage and the value of historically appreciated handicrafts. At present, we are witnessing increasing demand for quality material artefacts and an effort to link crafts with design and architecture. Collaboration between craftsmen and designers results in the fact that crafts are becoming increasingly part of our lifestyle and tourism. Factors that play an important role in this connection are an increase in foreign markets' interest in Czech artefacts, efforts to create a brand of a quality craft product, enhanced collaboration between craftspeople and regional authorities, and the presentation of crafts to the general public through media. By contrast, threats to the existence and development of arts and crafts are the high average age of craftsmen

and their growing uninterest in passing on their technological experience and know-how to the young generation. Other negative factors are redundant administration and restrictions resulting from current dysfunctional laws, a lack of client interest in quality craft products, a drop in institutional and government support for arts and crafts, a lack of willingness to develop the cultural, economic, and social potential of arts and crafts, and a decrease in taste and the ability to recognize high-quality craft products.

Describing, comparing, analysing, and interpreting the situation that arts and crafts are currently facing in the Czech Republic can become part of an important basis for preserving, transmitting, and further developing craft technologies. Strategic government support of arts and crafts is currently a basic presupposition for saving them. The research has demonstrated that it is essential to renew



Many craftsmen have mastered their craft primarily by studying relevant literature and thanks to their hands-on experience. Girdler and restorer Ivan Houska. Photo: Martin Frouz

institutional and government support for arts and crafts as well as the documentation of technological procedures. It is important to support educating the new generation of craftspeople and promote handicrafts in the Czech Republic and abroad. Arts and crafts in the Czech Republic have reached a turning point, and stabilizing them and creating conditions for their further development are important for their preservation. Some crafts are on the brink of extinction. That is why governmental institutions and non-profit organizations should cooperate to enhance arts and crafts in the social, political, and economic spheres. Arts and crafts should not function merely as revived history; they should be a functional branch of art culture, industry, and design, integrating traditional materials and time-proven craft technologies. For this reason, it is necessary that the government starts funding education and the development of craft subjects and fields of study. An inherent part of such studies should cover, in addition to clearly defined professions, the basics of accounting, marketing, and management; elementary knowledge of tax legislation and laws; basic computer skills; and foreign languages. It is also vital to ensure accreditation of branches of study that are not currently taught but that are still a valued manufacturing activity in the market environment (for instance, braiding). Elementary school teachers should be aware of the existence and focus of different craft subjects and how their graduates can apply expertise in such crafts. One possible way of effectively presenting arts and crafts to students is to build a replica of a village or a street with workshops and shops as in Poble Espanyol in Barcelona. At the governmental level, laws should be amended or at least reviewed to ensure the inclusion of arts and crafts and their products in state tourism policy.

*Barbora Půtová
(Institute of Ethnology, Faculty of Arts,
Charles University)*