

## Real Wealth BY TIMOTHY HOLTON

*The Value of Art and Craft in a Debased Economy.*



How's business?" customers at my picture-framing studio have been warily asking me. "We're doing better than Lehman Brothers but not as well as ExxonMobil," I reply, with humor that thinly masks my concern—a concern shared by most craft studios, which even in the best of times are no cash cows. We're all wondering: when folks are faced with tighter finances, forced to reassess their needs, will they continue to value our work? Will a world in survival mode buy as little as possible, for as little as possible, and shop anywhere but Wal-Mart?

In a bare-bones economy, will the law of supply and demand—where demand is defined in the most brutal terms—render *our* work worthless?

Practicing artisans like me play a key part in the Arts and Crafts revival, which is this magazine's reason for being. For us, the bigger question is, what will become of the revival? Is the meaning behind the Movement enduring enough to survive these times?

As I pondered such questions, I stumbled onto a 19th-century epigram quoted in the opening of John Bogle's new book *Enough: True Measures of Money, Business, and Life*:

*Some men wrest a living from nature and with their hands; this is called work.*

*Some men wrest a living from those who wrest a living from nature and with their hands; this is called trade.*

*Some men wrest a living from those who wrest a living from those who wrest a living from nature and with their hands; this is called finance.*

Bogle, founder and CEO of Vanguard Mutual Funds, respects as much as anyone the critical importance of the financial sector. But the basis of our wealth, he reminds

us, isn't in financial products and services, but in those who "wrest a living from nature and with their hands"—those who *make things*. Agriculture and manufacturing create the real wealth that is the economic foundation on which commerce and finance stand. The financial sector, in fact, *extracts* value and wealth from the economy. Bogle's point of view, that the demise of the manufacturing base combined with the bloating of the financial sector is unhealthy and dangerous, has been borne out dramatically, of course, by the calamitous financial news of these past few months. The crisis has been an object lesson in how precarious paper wealth becomes when it's too abstracted, too far removed from the real value that is the economic base. What we thought was solid wood, rock, and mortar turned out to be a house of cards. Our economy, in short, had become debased.

Bogle's argument deeply resonates with Arts and Crafts ideals and the aspirations of the A&C revival. His message about reassessing our values, as the book's title conveys, on "true measures of money, business, and life" echoes John Ruskin's motto, "There is no wealth but life." The Movement's whole reason for being was a reaction to the debased economic conditions of the 19th-century industrial world: debased, meaningless work and the result-

ing debased, shoddy, meaningless goods. Today's Arts and Crafts revival thrives because our economy and culture—from a cheap plastic toy made by slave labor in remote lands, to the crumpled Camel cigarette pack suspended on a fishing line selling for \$160,000 at last year's Art Basel Miami Beach—are many times more debased than they were a century ago.

The waste and profligacy of an insular, irrelevant “art world” and super-size-me junk consumerism leaves us deeply dissatisfied, hungry as ever for the genuinely satisfying life envisioned by the Movement. To paraphrase a remark of Joseph Heller's, which Bogle cites (and which provides the title of his book), dwellers in simple Arts and Crafts homes have something the hedge-fund managers in their multiple McMansions will never have: *enough*.

**O**UR COMBINED financial, military, and environmental troubles evoke for me, in my dark moments, the words of William Morris as he surveyed the wreckage of his day, and asked whether civilization “was all to end in a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap.” With boundless hope, he concluded it wouldn't, provided we took our fate (literally) into our own hands. Morris's mission, like Bogle's, was to prevent the real wealth we wrest from nature and with our hands from being debased by mere moneymaking. It was also to reshape our idea of “the good life,” from one of abundance of *stuff* to one of abundance of *life*, by grounding it on three indispensable footings: nature, love and fellowship, and work. Now with our national project of finding our footing (returning to a foundation of real wealth, real value), that guidance is vital. We must not only take better care of resources by “greening” our economy and lifestyles, not only renew our collective responsibility to the poor, the sick, and the less fortunate, but also restore the basis of our economy to creative manufacturing.

President Obama has said he's determined to craft economic policies that will “boost the capacity of the economy to grow itself from the bottom up.” But while Washington focuses on the critical condition of the auto industry, the lamp of Arts and Crafts ideals, too, must shine on our greater economic condition. Artisanry provides an admittedly tiny, but in many ways more fundamental, contribution to our national life.

How so? The arts and crafts are basic and essential. The handcrafts, or what used to be called the common arts,

once lined every Main Street. Personal, manual work is at the heart of the vital, productive, and prosperous national identity we've always celebrated. Think of Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*: “I hear American singing, the varied carols I hear; Those of mechanics . . . the carpenter . . . the mason . . .”

Today, in our sophisticated, globalized, and “advanced” economy, the minority that earns its living making things one at a time, by hand, may seem insignificant, and even more so during a massive economic crisis. Viewed in general as quaint and obsolete, artists and craftspeople may seem a group America can afford to ignore. But anyone who believes that fails to grasp that the handcrafts—direct personal skill and the know-how to use nature's materials to provide for ourselves—are the roots of the real wealth created by manufacturing. If manufacturing is the foundation, we are the bedrock on which that foundation was built and will always depend. We cannot revitalize the economy “from the bottom up” without nourishing the handcrafts that are its deepest roots. It is hard to imagine those most treasured American virtues, ingenuity and self-reliance, without the small artisan. And because our work is personal and our output is small, it isn't less valuable, but more so. In the workshop unencumbered by the needs and pressures of large organizations, both artistic expression and practical invention are most free. (Think not only of the cobbler's shop but also of David Packard's garage.) This is where innovation is born.

Even more important, it is only through that personal devotion, through the individual artisan's touch, that our most enduringly beautiful things are produced, and our deepest human needs and feelings answered. Rich in relatively few of these beautiful necessities assembled in the simple home, we can enjoy the pleasure of having enough.

**I**HAVE NO IDEA whether Bogle is even aware of the Arts and Crafts Movement, but his message about the good life amplifies that of the Movement and the handcraft traditions it cultivated, the rich rewards of joy and inspiration in work that William Morris expounded on in his lecture “Art: A Serious Thing”:

[W]hat I mean by art . . . is not the prevalence of this or that style, . . . but rather a general love of beauty, partly for its own sake, and because it is natural and right for the dweller on the beautiful earth to help and not to mar its beauty, and partly,

*yes and chiefly, because that external beauty is a symbol of a decent and reasonable life, is above all the token of what chiefly makes life good and not evil, of joy in labour, in creation that is: and this joy in labour, this evidence of man helping in the work of creation, is I feel sure the thing which from the first all progress in civilization has been aiming at: feed this inspiration and you feed the flame of civilization throughout the world; extinguish it, and civilization will die also. . . .*

Through the individual artisan's touch, our most enduringly beautiful things are produced, and our deepest human needs and feelings answered.

These are not words to be set aside until times are better and we have the leisure. No, these are words to inscribe over our doors today as we work to dig out of this mess. In the hour of deepest fear for our wealth, the vision of “helping in the work of creation” is both a necessity and an inspiration. We cannot after all separate the economy from civilization. We cannot separate the necessity of making things from art and all it promises. We cannot separate the work necessary to keep ourselves alive from the pleasure of *being* alive. These are the truths of Morris's words.

If making things is the foundation of wealth, we had better start honoring that work, rather than treating it, as we have for so long, as a necessary evil to be avoided. The Arts and Crafts revival has honored, supported, and celebrated manual work—in a refreshing exception to the general culture, to which the phrase “joy in labor” sounds ironic. But *will* this economy change that? As people's ideas of what they need change, will they be more inclined to embrace or to ignore what we make? I hope that if we ourselves remain grounded in sincere purpose and if we work with love, these troubled times may even inspire folks to more fully embrace the real value we offer. I've heard at least two students of consumer behavior note that, when the economy is down, people seek enduring value, even if that means spending more money.

**A**LTHOUGH I don't mean to whistle past the graveyard, I *welcome* the end of America's (second) gilded age; it should leave the hardwood picture-frame maker in a pretty good position. Good riddance to ostentatious display! Morris's wonderful phrase, which is quite indispensable to a picture framer,

“for beauty's sake and not for show,” reminds us we don't need showiness, but we do need real, grounded beauty.

As you take stock of where *you* find value, please understand that my message is not so much an appeal for your business as a reminder that the Arts and Crafts legacy, its true ideals kept alive by small craft studios, is more relevant than ever. That legacy is a flame we must keep, not only to warm our own hands by but also to carry as a bright lamp in our national mission to restore real wealth. And no, this is not at all like President Bush's call after the September 11 attacks to fight terrorism by shopping. On the whole, we have enough. We need less “stuff,” but we need more value; less paper wealth, more real wealth.

As economist Paul Romer said, a crisis is a terrible thing to waste. Crises force us back to essential values. The revival we need in manufacturing is already well underway in agriculture with a movement toward local farms providing fresh, organic food. (Note: In Europe, the Slow Food Movement has been followed by the Slow City Movement, advocating for and relying on local crafts as key to local identity and quality of life. More another time.) This economic crisis, by renewing our focus on the health of manufacturing, could be an opportunity.

Perhaps you will patronize my fellow craftspeople and artists; or rather you may devote yourself to more meaningful work. Either way, draw upon (do not just support, but *enjoy*) the work of those who “wrest a living from nature and with their hands.”

There is no wealth but life, and life endures—not through brutal, short-sighted, barren frugality, but through cultivating real wealth, which is first of all the natural creation of this earth; second, love and fellowship; but not least of all “joy in labor, . . . in helping in the work of creation . . . feeding the flame of civilization.” ■

TIMOTHY HOLTON *lives in Berkeley, Calif. He and the staff at his nationally renowned picture framing shop, Holton Studio Frame-Makers in Emeryville, Calif., design custom framing and make all the frames by hand. He welcomes your thoughts and comments: [Tim@HoltonFrames.com](mailto:Tim@HoltonFrames.com)*

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