

David Pye

The Workmanship of Risk

BY GLENN GORDON

The expression "Old World Craftsmanship" is supposed to evoke images of meticulous, snowy-haired old craftsmen making unbelievably fine furniture in little workshops set up among the toadstools and gnarled roots of the Black Forest. It makes some people go warm all over just to think of all these good-hearted Geppetos working away on masterpieces over there in the Old World, but basically, the phrase is a brainless banality that trivializes the idea of fine workmanship. It doesn't teach us how to distinguish between fine and mediocre workmanship, it just pours syrup over everything.

It was the great contribution of the late British writer and craftsman David Pye to have constructed a clear and unsentimental definition of workmanship that helps us understand how to judge its qualities. His definition is based not on whether a thing happens to be made by machine or made by hand (a distinction which he thought was pointless and futile) but

instead on the chance that exists, working on that thing from one moment to the next, to screw it up, no matter what the tooling. In constructing his definition, Pye coined a pair of phrases which

brilliantly differentiate the processes of making things: objects are made either by "the workmanship of risk" or "the workmanship of certainty."

Pye, who died in 1993 at the age of

84, was an architect, a woodworker, and an industrial designer, and for many years Professor of Furniture Design at the Royal College of Art in London. A great categorizer and definer of terms, he was a stickler for the correct use of language, which in itself was enough to distinguish him in the world of art theory and criticism, a field overrun by some serious gasbags. His insistence on intellectual precision helped raise the level of thought about what constitutes good workmanship and design beyond the usual clichés, to the point where the

discussion could have some bite.

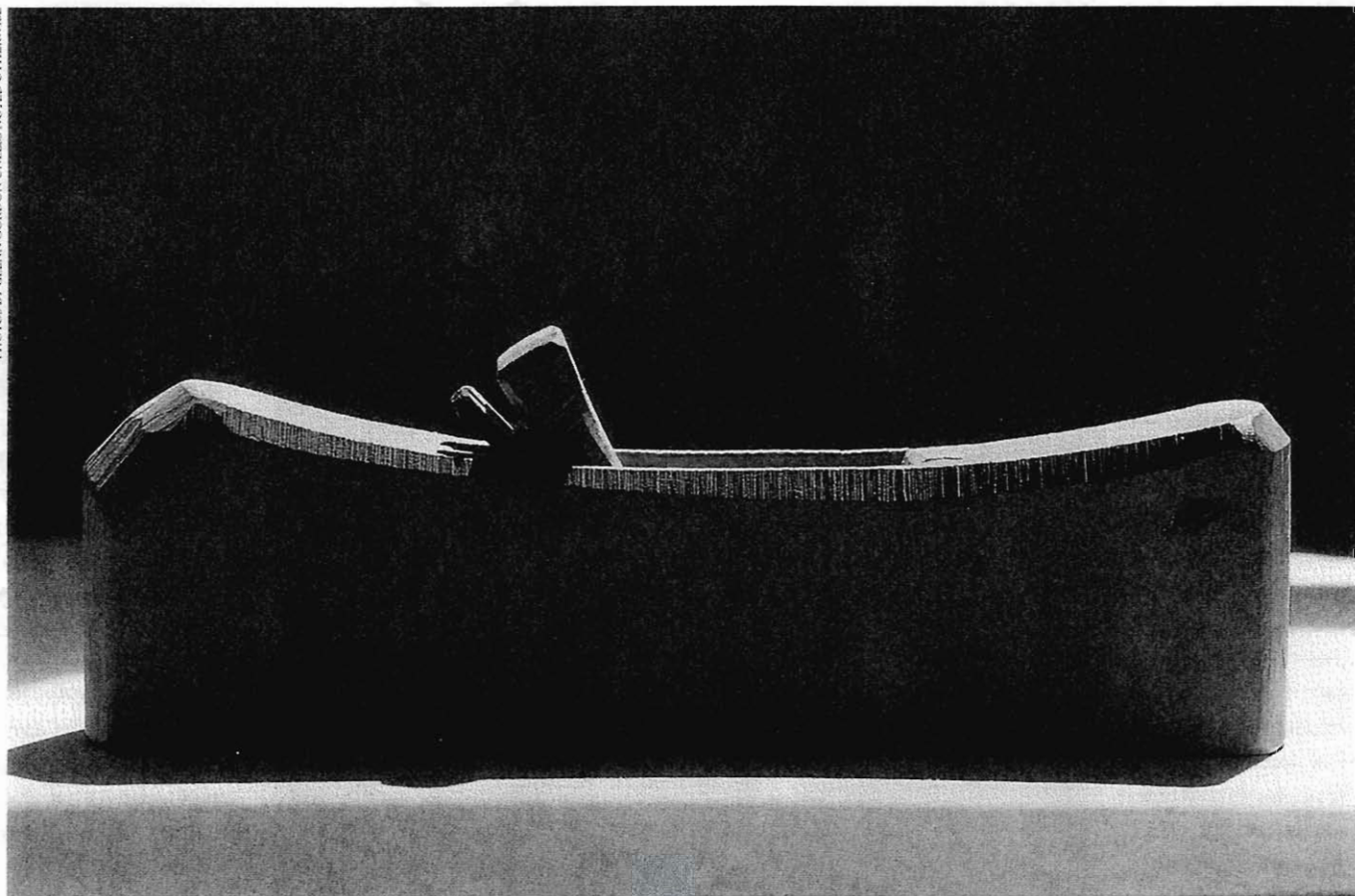
Pye wrote a pair of books in the 1960's which have had a powerful influence on many people working in the crafts and in industrial design, especially those who work with wood. The two books, *The Nature and Art of*



Pye in his shop: "Material in the raw is nothing much. Only worked material has quality, and pieces of worked material are made to show their quality by men, or put together so that together they show a quality which singly they had not."

"Some materials promise far more than others but only the workman can bring out what they promise." *David Pye*

PHOTOS BY GLENN GORDON UNLESS NOTED OTHERWISE



Workmanship and *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*, have recently been reissued by a publishing company with the ingenious name of the Cambium Press—a new independent publishing house established by John Kelsey, the original editor of *Fine Woodworking*. Both books call into question a lot of the old and shopworn assumptions of both traditionalists and modernists about what design and workmanship really consist of. On the one hand, Pye systematically debunks corny and nostalgic notions of “old-time craftsmanship”; on the other, he lets all the air out of a modernist slogan few of us ever bother to question—the idea that “form follows function” (Pye proves that it doesn’t, not necessarily). Along

The smoothing plane was made by Jim Krenov out of a chunk of wood full of numerous small knots given to him by one of his students, who told him it was “Venezuelan boxwood.” The workmanship is free in some of the areas where the hand grasps the tool, but highly regulated in others—at the throat opening, the flat bed for the iron, and the flat sole. The plane body exhibits what Pye meant by “diversity”: the block is smooth and flat in places where it needs to be, but hewn into facets and corrugated with band saw marks where those textures actually make more sense. Constructed largely by the workmanship of risk, the plane was made for the express purpose of further acts of workmanship of risk.

the way, he also mocks some of the ostentatious pieties of the “truth-to-material” school of craft, a group which in his mind might have included such craftsmen as George Nakashima, whose work he may actually have admired, but whose druidical vamping about religious communion with the souls of trees he would have ridiculed.

An iconoclast with little patience for muddled thinking or sentimentality about craft, Pye could be a scourge of the dull-witted and the inane, but he wrote out of an abiding concern for the survival of the tradition of doing things skillfully with your own two hands. His writing is sometimes a little overblown and unnecessarily abstruse (occupational hazards for a critic), but at its

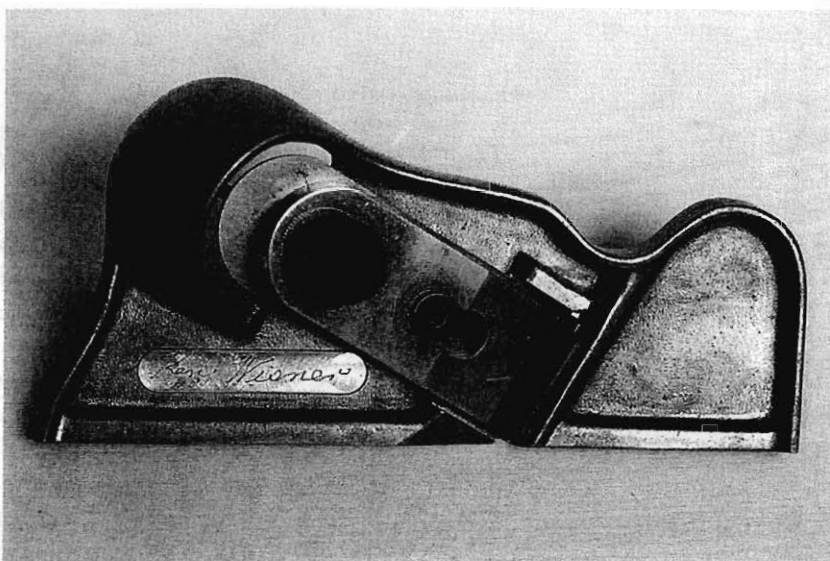
best, it has the hardness and clarity of a diamond, and can be tremendously illuminating. After reading Pye—especially his book on workmanship—woodworkers will feel surer not only of their hands but of their footing in a world that coldly consigns so much of the deepest impulse to make things to the margins of computer-driven life. Pye's books legitimize that impulse, and manage to do it without dissolving into puddles of nostalgia for the "good old days."

At different stages of the process of building anything, a craftsman goes back and forth between the workmanship of risk and the workmanship of certainty. In making drawer parts, for example, you start by surfacing the stock to thickness. The planer, set to give a consistent thickness, exemplifies the workmanship of certainty. Next, ripping this stock on the table saw, the fixed distance of the fence from the blade guarantees the outcome, i.e., boards of consistent width, also the result of an operation based on the workmanship of certainty, though here there is some risk involved—the stock has to be kept pressed against the fence. Once the woodworker starts cutting the dovetails, however, he enters the realm of the workmanship of unalloyed risk, with nothing to go on now but skill alone. The whole drawer is at risk—one slip of the saw can ruin it.

Writing by hand with a pen or a brush is perhaps the purest

form of the workmanship of risk (one of only two pure forms of it, according to Pye—the other is sewing by hand with needle and thread). Writing with a typewriter or using a stencil are intermediate kinds of workmanship—both are jigged or templated operations offering a degree of certainty as to the look of the result, but they still involve some risk...you can strike the wrong key or smear the stencil. Printed on the modern printing press, the "writing" of

Silicon bronze, skewed iron, right-angle edge-trimming plane—a revival of the Stanley No. 95. Cast, milled, tapped, lapped, and polished by Ken Wisner. Great diversity of textures: in different places, the bronze is polished, milled, lapped, left roughly sand-cast, or patinated with sweat and grime. Overall, the plane is manufactured using the workmanship of certainty. The signature of the maker, however, is engraved by hand. Writing being one of the purest forms of the workmanship of risk, the signature, ironically, individuates what is otherwise a mass-produced object.



the words is automated completely out of the craftsman's hands—the workmanship of certainty.

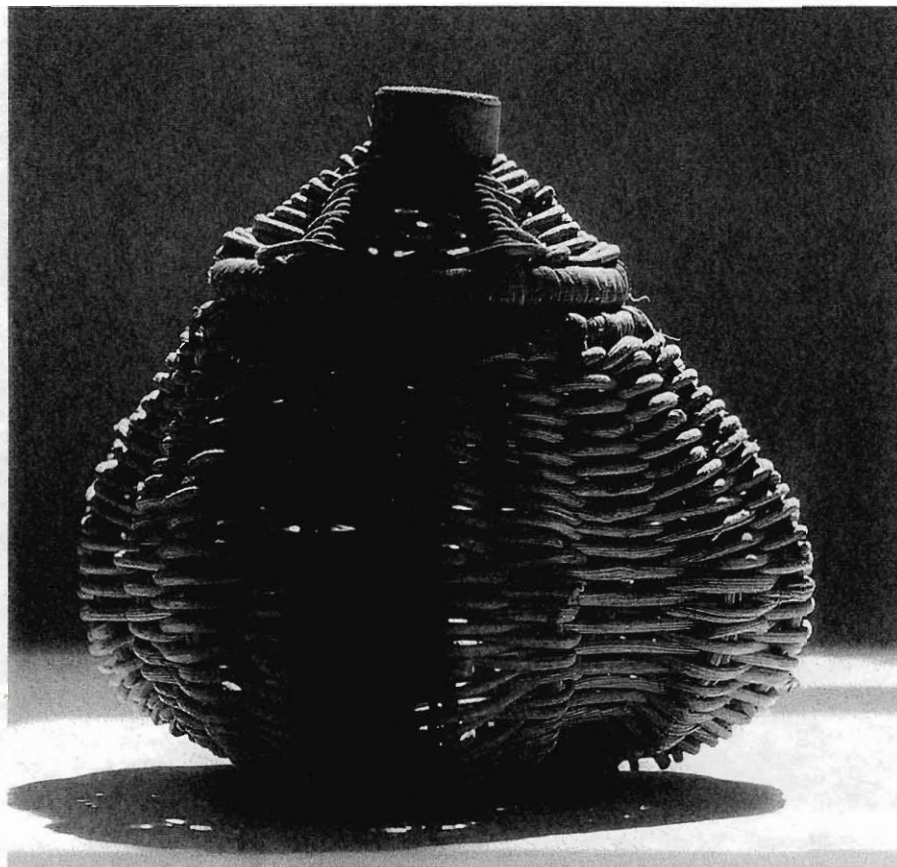
Besides defining workmanship in terms of the risk or certainty of the outcome of different operations, Pye also proposed a way of describing the characteristics of these operations along a spectrum running from "free-" to "regulated-" workmanship. Splitting out the oak for a green ladderback chair is free workmanship. Whittling on the porch or adzing a Windsor chair seat are also pretty free, but slightly regulated, too, because pocket-knives and adzes are self-jigging once they start their cuts (as are most edged hand tools). Improvisationally carving in the round is fairly free, but carving the parts of a Queen Anne chair by hand is a highly regulated or closely controlled kind of work, every move critical and contingent on the workmanship of risk. The same job done on a duplicating carver is, if anything, even more regulated, but here, the job is done using the workmanship of certainty (to the extent that the layout consistently runs the same way with the grain). Carrying the idea

even further, an injection-molded "Queen Anne style" plastic resin chair is produced through the workmanship of even greater certainty in a very highly regulated way that betrays no hint of variation from one chair to the next. Different kinds and combinations of workmanship—whether free or regulated...whether the

“Unless workmanship comes to be understood and appreciated for the art it is, our environment will lose much of the quality it still retains.” *David Pye*

outcomes are predictable or hanging in the balance—are each in their own contexts valid. None are *inherently* superior to any of the others (each kind, whether applied to a truck pallet or a hand-dovetailed drawer, can, in its own terms, be done cleanly, or sloppily, or somewhere in between) and Pye recognizes the value of each kind in its place.

He despairs, however, at the overwhelming preponderance in the modern environment of things made in a remorselessly regulated way, through the cookie-cutter workmanship of certainty, at the expense of the diversity of texture, surfaces and shapes that can only be achieved through the workmanship of risk. This brings him to the question that troubles everybody's soul, the question of whether the fine workmanship of the individual craftsman is going extinct. According to Pye, it isn't, and never will, but he says its products—whose qualities, for the most part, are the result of the workmanship of risk—will of necessity always be expensive. Even then, it's unlikely there'll ever be much money in it for the makers, but Pye, like James Krenov, suggests that in the future the finest work might be done not (or at least not



Garlic basket shaped like a bulb of garlic—made in China. Rapidly produced in quantity by cottage industry, the workmanship is fairly free, but probably regulated by a template or a mold of some sort. There is an element of risk involved in weaving the basket, but a primitive kind of the workmanship of certainty is mixed into it too.

done exclusively) by professionals operating under severe economic pressures, but by amateurs or part-time professionals who, relatively speaking, have nothing to lose in pursuing excellence for its own sake. To those who say, “Sure, but they’ve got all the time in the world,” Pye might have replied that the amateur who just pokes and fusses with

the work will fail to impart to it the signature vitality that comes of a swift sure stroke of the tool. However, he wrote, if they work at it, amateurs can develop the kind of unstrangled deftness and speed which makes a work come alive. For professionals, deftness and speed are legitimate points of pride. Not to be confused with the distracted haste of sloppy workmanship, they are crucial parts of the

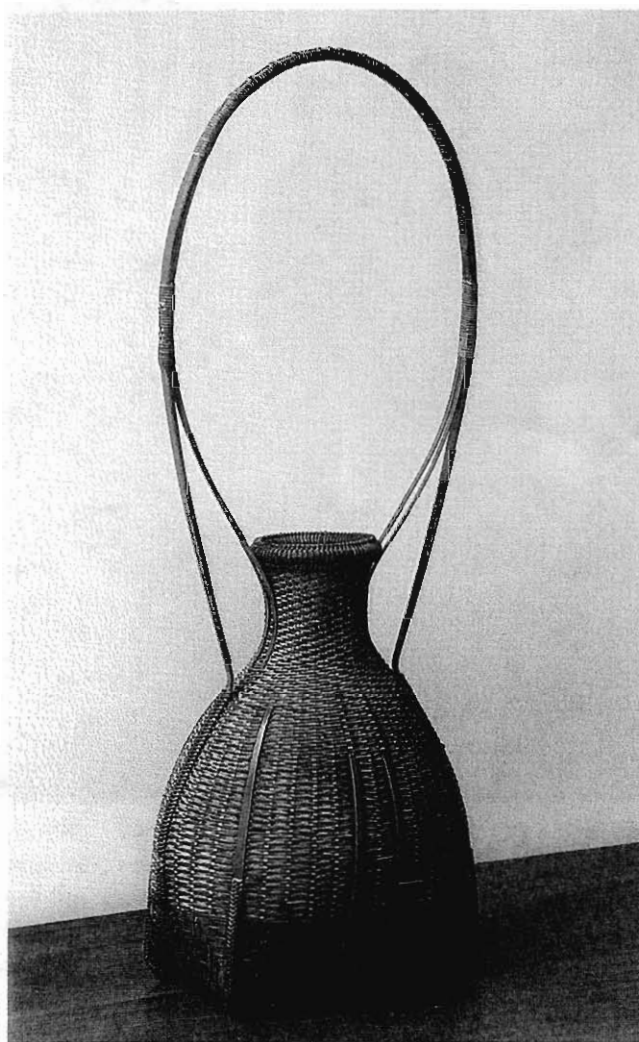
skill of anyone working to survive through craft, and it would be a mistake to discount them from the vantage point of the fussy perfectionism of an infinitely leisured amateur.

What underlies our conception of the right way to do something, our habit of differentiating between a beautifully done job and a poor one? Why do we even bother to make these distinctions? We bother, wrote Pye, because for all practical purposes, without beauty we are dead. Beauty is *biologically* necessary to human culture and civilization, even while our own culture tends to trivialize it, thinking of art as just the extra squirt of whipped cream, something pasted-on after all the real business is taken care of. Flying in the face of functionalists, Pye wrote that from

the standpoint of whether something works or not, most of the care lavished on fine workmanship is really pretty useless: profiled moldings aren't absolutely necessary; walls don't have to be dead-plumb; surfaces don't always have to be all that flat, but driven by a desire for order and comeliness we try to make them that way anyway. We are artists ("we" as a whole species—not just those few pursuing shaky careers in "The Arts") with a need to compose our environment.

David Pye was an accomplished craftsman himself, and so knew whereof he spoke. An inventive and poetic woodworker, his own work gave weight to what he had to say in print. In his later years, his work in wood consisted mostly of gracefully carved and turned bowls, crafted largely through the "workmanship of risk," sometimes in a "free-" and sometimes in a "highly regulated"-manner. His free workmanship is exemplified by the tapered flutings he imparted (by hand, controlling an ingenious gouge-holding fixture called a "fluting engine") to the surfaces of his carved bowls for rhythm, for texture, and simply for the sheer tonic clarity that comes of putting everything on the line with every stroke of the the tool. Pye's "more highly regulated" works were small lidded boxes turned and then meticulously incised with gravers (always with the risk of losing the piece with one slip of the hand) on an indexed, treadle-operated ornamental lathe.

Flower-arranging basket, Japan. An elegant example of something that could only have been made through the workmanship of risk, beginning with the decision on what pieces of bamboo to harvest, split, and prepare into splints, then going on to masterful control over things like the thickness, taper, color, and suppleness of the splints, and the density and tension of the weave. Highly regulated workmanship, but almost impossible to build from a drawing. Curves seem to spring out of the character of the material. Work like this comes only through the exercise of skill.



Whatever the theoretical concerns that underlie them, many of Pye's works, as you can see from the examples here, are extremely beautiful in and of themselves.

An analyst and philosopher of craft, David Pye was always sharply aware of his reasons for doing something this way or that. His perceptions on workmanship, tools, style, surface, texture, form, distance, scale—and about perception itself—are provocative and can open up your eyes. Occasionally he can lose you in a fog of too many words, but at best, he grapples brilliantly with questions that are not easy to get words around. Like James Krenov (who has great respect for him), David Pye gets you to think more deeply about what it means to pick up a tool. With *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* and *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*, he gave us the language to talk about the confusion surrounding the false opposition of the hand and the machine, and a means of finding our way out of it.

Glenn Gordon is a contributing editor.

The Nature and Art of Workmanship and *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design* are available directly from the publisher for \$19.95 each (plus \$2.50 shipping and handling for one or the pair):

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