

“This Is the Work of Our Hands /.../, the Japanese Work for Us”:¹ Handicrafts Representations and Practices



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In the early 1980s, the song lyrics quoted in the title of our editorial related to alienation from modern work, which online commentators amended by saying that the lyrics should refer to the Chinese and not the Japanese. At the time, there were far fewer “Chinese goods” available in Yugoslavia and Slovenia than in recent decades. The idea of a different kind of work in the (imaginary) past thus also found its place in popular culture. “The work of our hands” or handmade and original products, together with slowness, quality, and authenticity, have been associated with handicrafts since at least the Industrial Revolution. An old and familiar tale, then. So what can be said about handicrafts today, in a time of constant emphasis on novelty and innovation?

Several years ago, we organised two events at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. Following the first, *The Contemporaneity of Traditional (Handi)craft Skills and Endeavours* (2021), a collection of papers was published on the systemic (non-)solutions related to handicrafts in contemporary Slovenia (Zavratnik and Habinc 2022). This was followed by the international symposium *Handicrafts Know-How Transmission* (2023), where we gained insight into the systemic regulations in the handicraft sector outside of Slovenia (cf. Čebren Lipovec and Zavratnik 2025). Finally – and not unimportantly, after the Act on the Preservation and Development of Handicrafts (ZORR) was adopted in Slovenia in 2023 – we organised the international

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“This is the work of our hands” (orig. “To je naših ruku delo”) is part of the lyrics to the song “The Japanese Work for Us” (orig. “Rade Japanci za nas”) by the Slovenian band Gast’r’bajtr’s from the early 1980s, which – as interpreted by artificial intelligence – critically and humorously alludes, among other things, to man’s alienation from modern (post-industrial) work. Using the lyric in the title of the editorial is a nod to the inherently local, also because all the texts in the thematic section are the work of Slovenian ethnologists and cultural anthropologists, and because handicrafts are presented as distinctly linked to the local environment.

symposium *Hands-on Ethnographies: The Production and Meaning of (Contemporary) Handicrafts*, where we tried to build on previous knowledge and understanding with scientific and research-based reflections on contemporary handicrafts (cf. Jerkič 2026). The contributions collected in the thematic section of this issue are the result of the symposium, which took place at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, on 23rd May 2025. What all of the events have in common is that they not only try to look at the field from a spatial and systemic distance but through scientific considerations of what we are talking about when we talk about (contemporary) handicrafts, what and whom the conceptions of handicrafts include and exclude, what they pay attention to and what they disregard. The thematic section examines areas and aspects of handicrafts that are, at least in Slovenia, less frequently addressed in ethnology and cultural anthropology. Most of the contributions do not deal with recognised and established craftspeople who have been operating for decades within existing support mechanisms, such as the Chamber of Craft and Small Business of Slovenia or the new Act on the Preservation and Development of Handicrafts (ZORR). They also mostly do not deal with topics that often dominate handicraft research, such as handicraft techniques and skills, their preservation and transmission, heritagisation, and the symbolic and identity dimensions of handicrafts. The contributions instead treat handicrafts primarily as a contemporary social practice. They are interested in the social value of handicrafts and the meanings that individuals attribute to handicraft work, how handicrafts are embedded in everyday life, in questions concerning labour and entrepreneurship, and the tensions that arise between ideas about handicrafts and actual practices. In three contributions, handicrafts, as “the work of our hands”, are treated primarily as a contemporary social and economic practice. As Bajič points out in his contribution to this special issue, handicrafts are often positioned as an antithesis to capitalism, although they can also be understood as a historically specific construct of capitalism. The contributions therefore examine how notions of authenticity, slowness, creativity, and autonomy are constructed, reproduced, and transformed in contemporary handicraft practices.

Blaž Bajič reviews the literature on handicrafts to analyse what authors actually research, for whom, and with what effects. He focuses in particular on the temporality or alleged slowness of handicrafts. He is interested in how the literature addresses slowness in handicrafts and how it affects people and capital, highlighting in particular the commodification of slowness. His article, the article by Tajda Jerkič and Veronika Zavrtnik, and partly also the article by Robin Tigran Keršmanc share a focus on digital platforms (e.g. Etsy, YouTube, Instagram) and how they affect contemporary handicrafts. The authors discuss the possible consequent transformation of handicrafts as a hobby (i.e. for pleasure) into handicrafts as labour (i.e. to generate income) and its relation to projectification. For example, Bajič points out that in platform capitalism, their self-employment (including for craftspeople) is possible, but it is rarely an individual's personal choice; more likely, it is a necessity that leads to self-exploitation and requires individuals to create their own self-image and constantly maintain it. This represents a significant segment of the work they do – and is also “the work of their hands” as craftspeople.

Certain aspects of contemporary handicrafts are developed further in the second article, where Robin Tigran Keršmanc focuses primarily on projectification and some “key concepts” that projects connect to handicrafts: heritage, sustainability, entrepreneurship, and creativity. In the analysis of projects, handicrafts appear as a means of solving complex socio-economic and environmental challenges; however, the author finds that the entrepreneurial practices that handicraft-related projects encourage are not primarily intended to preserve skills and knowledge but to commercialise and commodify handicrafts. The article also maintains that the existence of handicrafts does not necessarily require the constant introduction of changes and innovations, since at least some craftspeople are successful on the market precisely because they insist on established techniques, high quality workmanship, and continuity. Promoting entrepreneurship creates the impression that entrepreneurial forms related to handicrafts (e.g. independent entrepreneurs and self-employed people in the cultural sector) do not already exist, and they are generally not addressed in projects. Similarly paradoxical is the emphasis projects put on the sustainability of handicrafts, which is supposed to be linked to digitalisation, since the latter is clearly unsustainable from an environmental perspective.

In the third article, Tajda Jerkič in Veronika Zavratnik discuss young craftspeople in Ljubljana who have mostly learned their craft skills on their own, also on online platforms such as YouTube, and whose hobby has in some cases developed into a professional activity. The authors are interested in what meanings their research participants attribute to their work and how they see their position in terms of the modern labour market and consumerism. The article thus also provides empirical insight into some of the themes already discussed by Bajič, for example, the invisible work required in sustaining a digital platform presence, and at the same time, the affective communities that emerge in digital environments. Jerkič and Zavratnik primarily highlight the fact that even in Slovenia today, there are many individuals who engage in various handicraft activities both for pleasure and to make a living, but who, due to different ways of learning, marketing, and representation, and above all, their lack of connection to heritage, are usually excluded from modern (professional) ideas about who modern craftspeople are, ideas which shape support policies and how handicrafts are defined.

Among the contributions in the thematic section, the article by Jasna Fakin Bajec deals most directly with handicrafts as heritage. She analyses a project related to the protection and transfer of handicraft knowledge, and finds that the participants often associate it with relaxation, pleasure, a sense of belonging, overcoming loneliness, and local community integration. Like the other authors, Fakin Bajec points out the discrepancies between European programmes and strategies on the one hand and the actual situation in local communities on the other: whereas in the former, heritage (and handicrafts as part of heritage) is seen primarily as a source of entrepreneurship, according to her observations, the inhabitants of the Vipava Valley associate it primarily with personal and collective memories. Young people in this part of Slovenia – unlike, for example, the interlocutors from Ljubljana in the article by Jerkič and Zavratnik – do not view handicrafts as economic capital. As Fakin Bajec notes, modern life, its values, and socio-political conditions do not

facilitate the development of traditional handicraft skills or encourage young people to seek out creative employment or economic profit in this field.

A comparison of the articles shows that among young people, attitudes towards handicrafts, “the work of one’s own hands”, are anything but unambiguous. It raises questions about the relationship between necessity and choice, and the compromises that these craftspeople make because of them: questions about the precariousness of handicrafts connected to different environments and living spaces, platform handicrafts as a choice or as a necessity, and about the “urbanity” (or the superiority and fashionability, see Kozorog 2012) of the cultural and creative industries.

The thematic section concludes with an interview with one of the participants of the symposium *Hands-on Ethnographies: The Production and Meaning of (Contemporary) Handicrafts* (2025), Dr Nicolette Makovicky, who is Associate Professor in Russian and East European Studies at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies. In her numerous publications, she deals primarily with the economic, historical, and political positioning of handicrafts, often women’s work. Although the interview differs in genre from the other texts in this section, it nevertheless highlights similar questions and considerations, including the structural limitations and the political-economic framing of handicrafts, and the value of spontaneity and creativity. At the same time, it delves into Makovicky’s own scientific and research interests in the field by discussing participatory observation (learning handicraft techniques during research).

If the thematic section on handicrafts raises more questions than it answers, its purpose will have been achieved. The idea that there can be little new to say about handicrafts after decades of ethnological and cultural anthropological research is, of course, an illusion. It makes sense – as with any other social phenomenon – to observe handicrafts over and over again in the context of changing social conditions, advantages, and limitations, and it makes sense to observe the (ir)rationalities and sticking points in handicrafts from the perspective of the actors involved. Because, as the thematic section shows, the view from a distance opens up paths forward that we as researchers try to ascertain, but only if in doing so we also study the practices and tactics of all those who are the object of our gaze.

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