HANDICRAFTS IN THE CITY—WHAT THEIR COMMERCIAL SIGNIFICANCE IS UNDER METROPOLITAN CONDITIONS: BY MARY K. SIMKHOVITCH

The revival of handicrafts in America has taken place largely in the country where rent is nominal, and where for the most part the crafts have been supplementary to other occupations. It is a question whether the development of the arts and crafts is suitable to the conditions of life in a large city. If a few general principles can be laid down they may prove timely. For the enthusiasm the word handicraft arouses is prone to be most indiscriminate, and the public will readily say “how interesting” or “how lovely” without regard to the financial success of the undertaking, the wages of the worker, or the permanent value of crafts training.

What the nature of the problem is may be indicated by haphazard reference to any craft. Take bookbinding. Bookbinding pays under two conditions, when there is division of labor, when in fact it is no longer a handicraft (i.e., the finished product of one hand-worker) but a trade; or when, being the product of the hand-worker, it is so uniquely interesting or beautiful that it can command a monopoly price. Here we have the key to one guiding principle. Anything that is unique can command a unique price, and in so far as any craft exhibits a very superior quality of workmanship that craft is a financial success. This is just as true in the city as in the country. If unusually beautiful metal work, pottery, lace, embroidery, woodwork, etc., can be produced it will command the unusual price and is economically justifiable.

Superior quality in crafts work depends upon two things: design and execution. And although the handicrafts extremist insists upon designer and worker being one and the same person, there seems to be no reason why in many of the handicrafts the two functions should not be separated, though the worker must be able to appreciate good design and the designer ought to know good work when he sees it. Most of the crafts have proved inferior in one or other of these directions. And it is clear that work of a monopoly value, good in design and superior in execution, will necessarily be extremely limited in extent.
HANDICRAFTS IN THE CITY

For the average worker in a city where rents are high it is obvious that hand work can not compete with the machine-made product. The modern man and woman see nothing sacred in hand work from the point of view of product unless it is really good work, and good machine work is generally preferred to poor hand work. It is then clear that in the modern industrial world the normal average worker will not engage in hand work unless it be avocational in character.

As secondary occupations, rug-making, lace, pottery, weaving, etc., will all prove lucrative and useful. The danger here is the stimulating of home work under conditions unfavorable to the health of the worker. Fortunately legislation against home work in crowded cities is making rapid strides and the enlightened promoters of handicrafts will therefore further attempts to provide central workshops even for avocational employment and to discourage home work which degenerates at once for the most part into the complete transformation of the home into the unhealthful shop. But with these precautions, handicrafts as avocations may be economically desirable where they can by no means be recommended as regular occupations for average workers. The average worker, as has already been indicated, can earn far more in the factory or store than in the production of hand work.

THERE is a class of the community, however, shut off from ordinary pursuits that can be readily and profitably turned into crafts work. This is the group of industrial defectives—the deaf, the deformed, and all those who are shut out by physical defects from the common occupations of industry. This group does not expect to obtain the normal rate of wages, and for this group therefore the handicrafts are especially useful. Frequently, also, members of this group may rise into the group first mentioned—those whose quality of workmanship is so good that it may command a monopoly price.

We have then three distinct classes appropriate for hand work in a city.

1. Those whose quality of work is so good as to command a monopoly price.

2. Those whose work is avocational, their main source of income coming from other quarters (especially women living at home). The
prices for such work must compete with machine work, and with work imported from countries where labor is cheaper.

3. Those who are shut out of the ordinary avenues of employment—the industrially defective.

In addition, two other large values of hand work must not be overlooked. First the educational value of hand work. All those values claimed for manual training are, of course, inherent in differing degrees in any handicraft, some being far more educational than others.

Therefore in teaching handicraft workers one may quite legitimately hold the point of view that one is maintaining a school and not a factory. The subsidizing of the earlier years of any handicraft development is, then, to be defended from the point of view of the educational value of such training to the worker.

A very practical result of such training is often to increase a girl's wage-earning capacity. Thus a girl may study embroidery. Even if she fails to become an embroiderer of extraordinary merit the training she has received will perhaps give her an added value as a trimmer in a dressmaker's establishment and increase her wage at once.

The other value of hand work especially to be noted is the reaction it has upon the machine product. Whereas the handicrafts by the nature of the case must be limited in extent, the effect of good simple design and excellence in workmanship is extending throughout industry.

We ought to preserve the talents of our immigrant population, and we may revive, within the limits defined, the handicrafts for which they may seem especially adapted by heredity and tradition. But no one must expect in any way to stem the tide of the historical process. The wage-worker must earn a living wage and as much more as can be had through the organization of the workers. Healthful conditions and restriction of the hours of labor must be maintained through enlightened legislation. Hand work will continue to be of primary importance as an influence upon machine production, and it will thrive only when undertaken as an avocation, or by those who are not fitted to cope with the conditions of normal production, or when the quality of the work is conspicuously good. Another service that centers of hand work can perform is to bring buyer and producer together without the intervention of the middle-man, thus enlarging the profit of the worker.