

# Innovation and Automation in Handcraft

## Peter Bloch

In the interface of technology and crafts are two recurring themes which every craftsman has to evaluate and interpret for his or her work. Those two themes can be summarized by the words "Innovation" and "Automation." The promises of Innovation are intertwined with the beguiling temptations of Automation.

Technological advancement of equipment and tools can allow for new avenues of creativity, and sometimes it can contribute to time-saving and effort-saving techniques. In my work as maker of translucent turned wood lampshades, I use a woodturning lathe that is powered by an electronic variable-speed controller and magnetic brake that are very sophisticated. I use gouges that are made of remarkable high-tech steel. I use the internet to discover new and obscure wiring components that allow me to come up with new lamp designs. I use my computer very extensively to produce promotional materials as well as digital photographs and video representations of my work. Without this sort of technological assistance, the type of craftwork that I do would be much more difficult to achieve and to present to my clients. But with great purposefulness, I impose on myself the requirements that:

- every tool is hand held
- every cut is hand controlled
- every decision is individualized to the particular circumstances

As craftspeople embrace the assistance of technology, we are often faced by Innovation's twin brother -- Automation. Our society is immersed in the results of automation. In most cases, this is a good thing, permitting the production of items that are cheaper, more reliable, and less back-breaking. But it is my fervent belief that automation has no place whatsoever in the world of fine handmade crafts. In fact it is the opposite of the concept of handmade.

In my work, the extreme (and entirely theoretical) example of automation would mean that I shove a log in one end of a gigantic machine and a lampshade pops out the other end. A more incremental example might be some electronic/mechanical gadgetry that could control the movement of a cutting tool to insure the uniform thinness of my lampshades. I maintain that any use, great or small, of automated techniques diminishes the ultimate aesthetic and cultural value of the piece. It would take more space than is available here to explain this in detail, but the bottom line is that so-called craftwork that is made with automated

processes is not strictly dependent on the manual skills of the craftsperson. Nor is each piece imbued with character and personality that is sought by our clients.

The essential conclusion for me is simple: every apparatus and process employed to make truly handmade craft objects should be controlled by the hands and eye and brain and heart of the maker. The seductive temptations offered by automated technologies should be resisted by individual craftspeople and by craft organizations. Now and in the future, there is a celebrated place in our society for truly handcrafted objects, as well as the makers of those objects.

*Note: this statement was written in conjunction with a national crafts conference titled "Crafts in the Digital Age," presented by the League of NH Craftsmen in 2004.*