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## A Nation That's Losing Its Toolbox

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THE scene inside the Home Depot on Weyman Avenue here would give the old-time American craftsman pause.

In Aisle 34 is precut vinyl flooring, the glue already in place. In Aisle 26 are prefab windows. Stacked near the checkout counters, and as colorful as a Fisher-Price toy, is a not-so-serious-looking power tool: a battery-operated saw-and-drill combo. And if you don't want to be your own handyman, head to Aisle 23 or Aisle 35, where a help desk will arrange for an installer.

It's all very handy stuff, I guess, a convenient way to be a do-it-yourselfer without being all that good with tools. But at a time when the American factory seems to be a shrinking presence, and when good manufacturing jobs have vanished, perhaps never to return, there is something deeply troubling about this dilution of American craftsmanship.

This isn't a lament — or not merely a lament — for bygone times. It's a social and cultural issue, as well as an economic one. The Home Depot approach to craftsmanship — simplify it, dumb it down, hire a contractor — is one signal that mastering tools and working with one's hands is receding in America as a hobby, as a valued skill, as a cultural influence that shaped thinking and behavior in vast sections of the country.

That should be a matter of concern in a presidential election year. Yet neither Barack Obama nor Mitt Romney promotes himself as tool-savvy presidential timber, in the mold of a Jimmy Carter, a skilled carpenter and cabinet maker.

The Obama administration does worry publicly about manufacturing, a first cousin of craftsmanship. When the Ford Motor Company, for example, recently announced that it was bringing some production home, the White House cheered. "When you see things like Ford moving new production from Mexico to Detroit, instead of the other way around, you know things are changing," says Gene B. Sperling, director of the National Economic Council.

Ask the administration or the Republicans or most academics why America needs more manufacturing, and they respond that manufacturing spawns innovation, brings down the trade deficit, strengthens the dollar, generates jobs, arms the military and kindles a recovery from recession. But rarely, if ever, do they publicly take the argument a step further, asserting that a growing manufacturing sector encourages craftsmanship and that craftsmanship is, if not a

birthright, then a vital ingredient of the American self-image as a can-do, inventive, we-can-make-anything people.

That self-image is deteriorating. And the symptoms go far beyond Home Depot. They show up in the wistful popularity of books like “Shop Class as Soulcraft,” by Matthew B. Crawford, in TV cooking classes featuring the craftsmanship of celebrity chefs, and in shows like “This Old House.”

Traditional vocational training in public high schools is gradually declining, stranding thousands of young people who seek training for a craft without going to college. Colleges, for their part, have since 1985 graduated fewer chemical, mechanical, industrial and metallurgical engineers, partly in response to the reduced role of manufacturing, a big employer of them.

The decline started in the 1950s, when manufacturing generated a hefty 28 percent of the national income, or gross domestic product, and employed one-third of the work force. Today, factory output generates just 12 percent of G.D.P. and employs barely 9 percent of the nation’s workers.

Mass layoffs and plant closings have drawn plenty of headlines and public debate over the years, and they still occasionally do. But the damage to skill and craftsmanship — what’s needed to build a complex airliner or a tractor, or for a worker to move up from assembler to machinist to supervisor — went largely unnoticed.

“In an earlier generation, we lost our connection to the land, and now we are losing our connection to the machinery we depend on,” says Michael Hout, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley. “People who work with their hands,” he went on, “are doing things today that we call service jobs, in restaurants and laundries, or in medical technology and the like.”

That’s one explanation for the decline in traditional craftsmanship. Lack of interest is another. The big money is in fields like finance. Starting in the 1980s, skill in finance grew in stature, and, as depicted in the news media and the movies, became a more appealing source of income.

By last year, Wall Street traders, bankers and those who deal in real estate generated 21 percent of the national income, double their share in the 1950s. And Warren E. Buffett, the amiable financier, became a homespun folk hero, without the tools and overalls.

“Young people grow up without developing the skills to fix things around the house,” says Richard T. Curtin, director of the Thomson Reuters/University of Michigan Surveys of Consumers. “They know about computers, of course, but they don’t know how to build them.”

Manufacturing’s shrinking presence undoubtedly helps explain the decline in craftsmanship, if only because many of the nation’s assembly line workers were skilled in craft work, if not on the job then in their spare time. In a late 1990s study of blue-collar employees at a General Motors plant (now closed) in Linden, N.J., the sociologist Ruth Milkman of City University of New

York found that many line workers, in their off-hours, did home renovation and other skilled work.

“I have often thought,” Ms. Milkman says, “that these extracurricular jobs were an effort on the part of the workers to regain their dignity after suffering the degradation of repetitive assembly line work in the factory.”

Craft work has higher status in nations like Germany, which invests in apprenticeship programs for high school students. “Corporations in Germany realized that there was an interest to be served economically and patriotically in building up a skilled labor force at home; we never had that ethos,” says Richard Sennett, a New York University sociologist who has written about the connection of craft and culture.

The damage to American craftsmanship seems to parallel the precipitous slide in manufacturing employment. Though the decline started in the 1970s, it became much steeper beginning in 2000. Since then, some 5.3 million jobs, or one-third of the work force in manufacturing, have been lost. A stated goal of the Obama administration is to restore a big chunk of this employment, along with the multitude of skills that many of the jobs required.

And there is an incipient upturn in the monthly employment data, although the president will almost certainly finish his first term with the manufacturing work force well below the 12.6 million it was when his administration began. (It was nearly 11.9 million last month.)

“We sit in rooms with manufacturers who tell us that location decisions to move overseas that were previously automatic are now a close call, and that the right policies can make a difference,” Mr. Sperling says.

THAT is particularly the case if federal, state and local governments intervene with generous subsidies, like those seen in China, Germany, Japan, France, India and other countries eager to sustain manufacturing.

Government subsidies are helping to make manufacturing in America more attractive, but the turnaround may be hard to sustain. And it may be too late. Big multinationals already operate factory networks in Europe and Asia, as well as in the United States. Stepping up exports to those markets from the United States, rather than producing in them, is becoming less of an option — short of an international agreement like the Plaza Accord of 1985, which realigned currencies and gave American manufacturers a temporary boost.

As for craftsmanship itself, the issue is how to preserve it as a valued skill in the general population. Ms. Milkman, the sociologist, argues that American craftsmanship isn’t disappearing as quickly as some would argue — that it has instead shifted to immigrants. “Pride in craft, it is alive in the immigrant world,” she says.

Sol Axelrod, 37, the manager of the Home Depot here, fittingly learned to fix his own car as a teenager, even changing the brakes. Now he finds immigrant craftsmen gathered in abundance outside his store in the early morning, waiting for it to open so they can buy supplies for the

day's work as contractors. Skilled day laborers, also mostly immigrants, wait quietly in hopes of being hired by the contractors.

Mr. Axelrod also says the recession and persistently high unemployment have forced many people to try to save money by doing more themselves, and Home Depot in response offers classes in fixing faucets and other simple repairs. The teachers are store employees, many of them older and semiretired from a skilled trade, or laid off.

“Our customers may not be building cabinets or outdoor decks; we try to do that for them,” Mr. Axelrod says, “but some are trying to build up skill so they can do more for themselves in these hard times.”