

Artisan Perspective

1830. My name is Josiah Carey and I am 48 years old. I am a master cabinetmaker, as were my father and my grandfather. At the age of eleven I began work in my father's cabinet shop as an apprentice. At the time, Father employed one journeyman cabinetmaker and two apprentices. I was eighteen when I completed my initial masterpiece—an inlaid mahogany chair and table that demonstrated my mastery of the skills of the trade. I was then awarded the status of journeyman in my father's shop. Five years later I applied to the local Cabinetmakers Society for admission to mastership of my craft. I completed a more elaborate masterpiece of four pieces of finely crafted furniture under the supervision of my father. My father and an assessor from the Society judged my work, and, at the age of twenty-two, I was declared a master of my craft. When my father died four years later, I became master of the shop.

▪ **From Carey's description, what is involved in becoming a master craftsman?**

I think back fondly on those days and worry that my own sons may never know the joys of that life. My father was an honorable master. He worked daily in the shop with his workers. He was concerned for their welfare, and treated each man with respect. When a man fell ill, my mother would be sure that he had warm meals and whatever care she could provide. As the shop took in work, it was apportioned to each man according to his skill level. A man worked on a piece from beginning to end with my father ensuring that no piece left the shop that did not meet the high standards of quality for which we were known. He never rushed anyone to finish a piece, but insisted that each man take the time necessary to produce furniture of quality and beauty for which we could all be proud.

The shop was a lively place with constant conversation about politics, religion, and philosophy. The day was broken up by breaks for tea and sweets in the morning and afternoons, beer in the late morning, and the lunch hour. Apprentices were often sent to the local pub to keep the shop jug topped off. On important occasions work in the shop stopped altogether. I remember well the day-long celebration that accompanied the successful completion of my masterpiece. When a new journeyman arrived in the shop, everyone stopped to raise a glass and the commemoration carried on into the afternoon.

I do not mean to give the impression that life in the shops was a constant, drunken revel. Everyone knew that the work came first. Excessive drinking that threatened quality work was not tolerated. When the shop had a full workload, each man was expected to focus on the job at hand with concentrated effort. However, in other times, there might be fewer orders, and workers occupied themselves less strenuously with making shop repairs and chatting with shopmates.

- **How would you describe the working life of those in the craft shops?**
- **What things seem most important to the master craftsman?**
- **How does the work of the craft shop compare to jobs today?**

I must admit that I was lucky to be born the son of a master craftsman. Others who have entered the trade have been less privileged. In order to protect the integrity of our trade, there is only room for so many masters in our Cabinetmaker's Society, and many who work in the shops have found it difficult to advance to master status. Indeed, the journeyman in my father's shop when I began my work never became a master although he was very skilled. He eventually left my father's employ and began producing cheap, shoddy goods for one of the greedy merchants who have begun setting up warehouses for selling such trash to the public.

Although I have some sympathy for those whose advancement has been blocked, I cannot condone such dishonorable work that diminishes the integrity and workmanship of the entire trade. Honorable craftsmen

must resist the cheapening of our trade. It takes many years of work for a craftsman to master the “mystery” of the trade so that we can produce beautiful, fine furniture that brings joy to the user. This mystery is our rightfully earned property, and these new business arrangements threaten to rob us of that property.

- **Why did the craftsman societies block some journeymen from becoming masters?**
- **What is the “mystery” of the trade, and why does Carey claim it is the rightful property of craftsmen?**
- **Why is he worried about journeymen leaving the shop and working for the merchants of mass production furniture?**

These conniving, greedy businessmen look only to maximize their profits without regard for the quality of the product. They use their money to buy machines and assemble unskilled men, women, and children to do work that skilled men have trained a lifetime to do. These dishonorable trades produce furniture, clothing, and other items that are so poorly made that they are not worth having. Rather than producing a fine item from start to finish, these unskilled workers spend their days placing spindles in fifty cheap chair backs or sewing fifty collars on ready-made shirts. They produce no finished product that they have crafted with their own hands. How can one feel pride in his or her work in such conditions?

Unfortunately, more and more craftsmen are finding it impossible to compete with the prices of these inferior goods. Like the journeyman who left my father’s shop, they submit themselves to becoming employees of these large enterprises in which they have no say over the quality of their work. In some cases, they may make more money as a wage earner than as a shop craftsman, but at what cost?

- **What seems to be happening to craft shops during this time period?**
- **Why does Carey question the wisdom of workers who choose to work in the new industries?**

I will sell oranges on the street before I give up my independence or betray my craft to such wage slavery! As the master of a small shop, I control the conditions of my work. I own my tools and I sell the finished products of my labor. I decide the quality of those products, and I feel genuine joy in using my skills to produce quality furniture. My employees have a daily personal relationship with their employer rather than being faceless names on a payroll sheet. Even the apprentices in my shop have the advantages of meaningful work that allows them to produce a final product of real beauty and value. I could not lower the quality of my product to compete with these dishonorable businessmen if I wished to do so. My workmen’s sense of craft would cause them to refuse to do such work.

As an honorable craftsman, I will resist these evil trends to my last breath. I urge my brethren to band together, or we shall lose forever our way of life. I do not call for the violent destruction of a thousand manufacturing machines as we saw happen in 1811 and 1812 in Nottinghamshire. But authorities should know that desperate, proud men may do desperate things. Instead of violence, I encourage every craftsman to join and pay dues to a Friendly Society, an association of fellows from the same trades who work together to protect the rights and privileges of their craft, police the honorable behavior of their members, and provide mutual assistance and support to individual members when they are in need. Only by joining together can our collective strength fight off the dishonorable tide that threatens to take us all under.

- **What does Carey mean by wage slavery?**
- **What specific things does he think craftsmen will lose if they join the new manufacturing economy?**
- **Why does he believe the Friendly Societies offer hope for the future of the craftsmen?**