



ARTISANS KEEP TRADITIONAL CRAFTS ALIVE

The words of Portland photographer Ray Bidegain comprise the first sentence in a handsome new book about traditional arts in danger of being forgotten in our mechanized, mass produced, assembly line age.

“Getting out there and doing things with your hands is honest and human,” Bidegain writes.

And as the book “Almost Lost Arts” demonstrates, it is also deeply inspiring.

Seattle writer Emily Freidenrich has aggregated the stories of 20 different expert practitioners who are keeping specialty crafts alive. From Issaquah to Oaxaca and Auckland to Oakland, these remarkable artisans universally demonstrate qualities of perseverance, ingenuity and artistry.

Bidegain, for example, is one of a handful of folks who mastered working with wet plate photography, which originated in the 19th century. It is a multi-step process that involves coating a glass plate in a chemical bath that makes the plate light-sensitive for only as long as it remains damp – usually no more than 10-15 minutes. The plate is loaded into the camera, exposed to the image and then requires additional treatments for the image to develop. The process is particularly effective in portraiture, as it presents facial features in intensive, luminous detail.

Other artisans from the Pacific Northwest featured in this book include a book mender and an antiquarian horologist who works in an enchanting world of tiny gears, musical cylinders and miniature automaton.

Going farther afield, the book introduces readers to the longstanding female tradition of adobe enjarradoras (plasteresses) among the Pueblo Natives; an ancient technique of bronze casting in Milan; and the elegant, centuries-old Japanese ceramic-repair solution called Kintsugi, which uses lacquer laced with gold powder to mend cracks in broken plates or bowls.

For the dwindling numbers of us who still understand the pleasure of poring over maps, there are two chapters that are bound to delight. One is devoted to a company that produces custom-made estate maps, and the other to a studio that crafts exquisite, handmade globes. Both enterprises are located in Great Britain.

The book also includes some rather surprising 20th century art forms in her survey of crafts that she believes are in danger of disappearing. Neon artists are one example (say it isn’t so!). And up until last year, a company in the Ozarks was apparently the only company left in the world that still manufactured cassette tapes. Recently a French enterprise started providing friendly competition.

“Almost Lost Arts” is loaded with gorgeous photographs of artisans plying their trade. It’s surprising that the images have been procured from dozens of different photographers, because the book, from a visual standpoint, is pleasingly cohesive.

Less successful are the written profiles of the artisans. Apparently, the author culled information from a variety of websites and news sources, but it is unclear whether she undertook much onsite, original reporting for the book. The essays lack intimacy, and have a somewhat cursory feel.

My advice is to glean what you can from the writing, but indulge in the eye candy!

This Week’s Book

“Almost Lost Arts” By Emily Freidenrich
Chronicle – 208 pp — \$35

