
MASTER WEAVER

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WEAVERS' GUILDS.

In the middle ages and as late as the beginning of the 18th century a Weavers' Guild was nothing else as a mixed labour-management union. Its aims were: to protect the members from unfair competition, to maintain a reasonable level of prices for both: work, and produced goods, and to supervise the training of young workers.

Protection of members from competition was easy since the Guilds had practically a monopoly in production. An "unfair competitor" would then be anybody, not a member of the Guild, who would produce similar goods. And of course if the goods were not "similar" then they would compete with another kind of a Guild. The Guilds would then see to it that such a free-lancer could not get any supplies of raw materials, and that the markets would be closed to his products.

Prices were maintained by eliminating competition, and by "lobbying" with the view to enact laws forbidding import of similar and cheaper goods from abroad.

Supervision of training was very strict and had as its purpose production of highly specialised master weavers. Even then it was obvious that a weaver can be very good only if he limits himself to a very narrow speciality.

Guilds were very exclusive, and joining one of them was often impossible unless one was born in a weavers' family, or if one came from another district or country already as an accomplished weaver. But then to be a weaver he had to belong to a Guild first.

In the countryside there were peasants weaving for their own or their community needs. They were not organised, although again the trade remained usually in the same family.

The industrial revolution destroyed the power of the Guilds, so that hardly anything but the name remained. The trade unions on one side, and the textile companies on the other took over.

The only weaver who was not affected for a few decades was the peasant and in more backward countries he was not affected at all until the last great war. For that matter he was doing his work with about the same yarns and on about the same looms for ten centuries or more.

It is a peculiar coincidence that this peasant-weaver, who survived the industrial revolution precisely because he never belonged to the Guilds, inspired later on a new generation of hand-weavers, and thus became a spiritual forefather of a new network of Weavers' Guilds.

What is a modern Guild, and what are its purposes?

Perhaps it is not very strange that in spite of completely different conditions in which we live, the essential purposes of a modern guild are the same as they were two hundred years ago.

Obviously a modern guild cannot protect the members from the "unfair" competition of power weaving. Nothing short of a total nuclear war can. But the guild can protect the members from the competition of other less scrupulous craftsmen who sell mass-produced cheap wares made on half-automatic looms - as exclusive hand weaving. We have discussed this point when speaking about standards.

It can also help to maintain reasonable prices. By "reasonable" we mean minimum prices. We have nothing against weavers who overprice their goods. If they cannot sell them it is their concern. But the Guilds can see to it that the members do not figure out their prices on the basis: "so much for the yarn and a little more". The Guild's approval seal should be given only for articles properly priced. This applies to the non-members as well.

But the main concern of every Guild should be the training of new craftsmen. First by supplying them with information about schools, teachers, books, publications, etc. Then by helping the members to test their own skill and knowledge in competitions, exhibitions, tests of skill with or without certificates. This subject has been also discussed in full in our articles about Standards. Guilds with large membership should also organise workshops, and lectures, possibly with lecturers or instructors from other guilds. This can be done at a reasonable rate or on exchange basis.

Much less important are "socials". They may be a pleasant addition to other activities, but if they are the only sign of a guild being alive, the members should do something about it.

Fortunately most of the guilds on this continent do what they can about at least the 3-rd point of the schedule, i.e. education. And there are quite a few thinking seriously about the seal of approval and other ways of protecting their members.

It is obvious then that each weaver can only gain by joining a guild. The fees as a rule are negligible, but the duties of each member should be taken seriously. A guild can be only as active as its members, and "honorary" members are of little use.

Now, which guild should I join? Usually the same territory is covered by several. There is one, two, or three local guilds in a large city. There may be a State or a Provincial one, or even a National one (there is not any so far, except for craftsmen guilds - much wider organisations than Weavers' Guilds).

But our choice is much wider than that, because in most cases the by-laws of a Guild do not forbid you joining it, even if you live thousands of miles away. We may say that there is not much point in doing it, but let's not forget that many guilds publish quite interesting bulletins, and have competitions and exhibitions for members only. Thus the choice is unlimited. But what kind of a guild should one select?

It is a good idea to write identical letters to several guilds we would like to join. Ask about the membership, and the by-laws. From the point of view of a new member the best guilds are of medium size. Very large ones become too impersonal in their relations with individual members, when the very small ones have very limited means.

Then study the by-laws carefully. The by-laws should be signed by the officers of the guild, dated, and registered somewhere. The laws about societies change from state to state and from province to province, but in general institutions of this kind can and must be registered before they can collect any fees from the members. When reading the by-laws we should pay attention to the character of the guild. A really "democratic" guild has officers elected by the General Assembly of all members. The officers can not serve for more than two years in the same capacity. If the membership is widely dispersed, the ballot can be taken by mail, but there must be a committee which receives and counts the votes.

The guilds without properly registered by-laws are at the best private enterprises, hardly "democratic". At the worst they are nothing but a source of potential trouble, since their right to collect fees from the members is extremely doubtful and may be questioned by the authorities.

The by-laws should also give you the answer to the most important question: whether you are eligible as a member.

Once you have selected and joined a guild, try to be an active member. Try to belong to all the branches, committees, and sections. Take your duties seriously. Remember that on your sharing in the interests of a Guild depends the future of handweaving and of crafts in general.

There are also Guilds of an entirely different nature. They are organised by a person or a group of persons as a business venture. They do not pretend to be what they are not. They offer to the members definite services such as periodicals, books, lessons, sometimes even tests and certificates of skill. They are more expensive of course, but the member being always on the receiving end so to speak, they could not work otherwise. Personally each member gets much more from such an organisation, but his role is limited to paying the fees. They are run efficiently or do not stay long in business. Except for the name they have hardly anything in common with the Guilds under discussion, and the only reason we mention them here is to avoid confusion.
