

The Artisan Analogy

A third analogy (in addition to the Military and Academic Analogies) to help explain the hierarchical system in traditional martial arts is the Artisan Analogy — a looser analogy, but nonetheless a descriptive one.

In medieval times artisans and artists studied under a master craftsman who first gave them menial tasks and then let them mix paint, prepare canvas, or other such duties, gradually increasing responsibilities until the student was ready to contribute an imitation of the master's artistry to a work bearing the master's name. In this way, for example, Renaissance artists like Raphael could turn out excellent paintings for multiple commissions without having to do all the work himself.

Occasionally, some students would pass through the stage of artisan and become full-fledged artists themselves. Some would even open a school and take in other disciples to serve as apprentices.

In today's culture, this system has been lost both to automation and to ready-made, quickly available art and craftsmanship. Furniture is seldom made by human hands, paintings earn more money in signed lithograph editions than in the original, and sculpture, if used at all, is usually a caste imitation of a well-known ancient piece. Artists still exist, to be sure, and they still have students, but the experience of contemporary artistry for most people is limited to one-day sales at the Holiday Inn or to inner city street-murals. The notable exception is the study of traditional martial arts.

Where contemporary martial studies often take the route of the pre-framed print, the traditional arts take a slower, more meticulous and often more frustrating route. Contemporary martial arts sell the student what the student thinks he needs (fun, praise, exercise, fighting skills) until he is happy (or disappointed) and stops training. There is nothing unusual here: this is the way of most volunteered-for instruction — dancing, skiing, pottery, woodworking, etc. The subtle distinction represented by traditional martial arts is that the master artist is most concerned with developing and preserving his/her art, not in selling his instruction. Selling instruction is a necessary annoyance that allows him to survive while looking for an inheritor or inheritors to preserve the art. This seems very foreign and even elitist to the modern Westerner, but it does serve a purpose, although it has drawbacks as well.

The strongest benefit of an art-oriented tradition is that quality standards will be maintained even if it means the loss of students who think those standards too severe or not their cups of tea. The biggest drawback of an art-oriented tradition is that an art that does not appeal to various cups of tea may soon not have any consumers/students/inheritors. Modern traditionalists are aware of this and tend to have an inner core and an outer ring of students. The outer ring gets to experience the superficial teachings while the inner core gets to experience more detailed instruction and the more demanding standards that go with it. In other words, some students get to be people who prepare the canvas or mix the paint and some get to be people who understand and practice the art itself.

The master painter is content to have developed a gallery of notable works, even a masterpiece or two. A master martial artist is content only if he can develop at least one student capable of carrying on the art. In a very real sense, the student is not only the new master artist, but also the work of art. It is the painting that conveys the art of painting, the sculpture that conveys the art of sculpting, and the student who become a master martial artist that conveys and continues the martial art.