The hand-made tale

What a superb book this is. The measure of its excellence is such that, the central premise being so clearly intelligent, so engagingly correct, it would still prove a worthwhile read even if its execution had been a letdown. As it is, the perfectly planned prose and stylistic design could elevate Peter Korn’s account of his life and career, as a craftsman (a furniture maker) to the status of a modern classic. This is one cool piece of work.

It is also timely. After years — decades even, as long as a century — spent enduring the sneers and condescension of the sadly ignorant yet culturally influential, manual labour has recently enjoyed a welcome return to fashion. I sometimes think that almost everyone I know — young and old, male and female, rich and poor — would rather be making or baking,

sowing or shaping, farming, tending, growing or hoeing than doing whatever they are doing. Which probably involves a desk, a computer and a telephone.

The modern passion for food and cooking is obvious. Ceramics and carpentry, embroidery, knitting and dress-making are all also making a comeback. Home-made or hand-made is what we all aspire to buy and eat and own and admire. As the old saying has it, nobody on their deathbed wishes they’d spent more time at the office. Some might well, however, bemoan the lack of time they put in the garden, the kitchen or at the workbench, doing what made them happy. Having spent centuries trying to escape the drudgery of manual labour, many people are now seeking to rediscover its virtues, and finding that when it is optional, and allows creative input, working with your hands can be as rewarding as working with your brain.

Or rather, as Korn says, working with your hands very much also involves working with your brain. The distinction is, he says, largely a false one, and as skill levels rise, becomes absurd. The very definition of skill is the application of memory, intelligence and imagination to a task. A great deal more brain power is spent in crafting, say, an oak dining table than in the average white-collar job, and at the end (with practical

After years of being sneered at, manual labour is enjoying a return to fashion.

The Education of a Craftsman
by Peter Korn
Square Peg, 179pp £15 * £13.50

Or rather, as Korn says, working with your hands very much also involves working with your brain. The distinction is, he says, largely a false one, and as skill levels rise, becomes absurd. The very definition of skill is the application of memory, intelligence and imagination to a task. A great deal more brain power is spent in crafting, say, an oak dining table than in the average white-collar job. And at the end, with practice,