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THE REVITALISATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND TRADITIONAL CRAFTS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM A MASTER THATCHER*

LIZETTE GRADÉN
Associate Professor
Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences
Lund University
Turmalingatan 1b, 22488 Lund, Sweden
Researcher
The Regional Museum Scania
Östra Storgatan 27, 291 29 Kristianstad, Sweden
e-mail: Lizette.graden@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5617-4945

TOM O'DELL
Professor Emeritus
Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences
Lund University
Turmalingatan 1b, 22488 Lund, Sweden
e-mail: tomedwardodelliii@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3242-759X

ABSTRACT
Gamlegård farm at the Kulturens Östarp open-air museum, the von Echstedtska Manor farm at Värmland's Museum, and Oktorpsgården farm at the Skansen open-air museum are three disparate farmhouses scattered across southern Sweden whose histories have very different trajectories. What unites them are their roofs, a craft, and a man. They are all buildings considered essential expressions of Swedish cultural heritage, with thatched roofs laid by the same thatcher. For museum visitors, thatched roofs represent a picturesque, somewhat romanticised image of the Swedish past. For the thatcher, roofs mean a livelihood and a crafting process dating back thousands of years. The authors argue that the relationship between the individual craftsperson, the material, and the crafting of traditional knowledge is central to the dynamics of intangible cultural heritage. This paper focuses on a thatcher and his role in engaging a broader public in a 'fading' craft and in creating renewed interest among people interested in sustainable living.

KEYWORDS: crafts • making • cultural heritage • sustainability • craftsmanship

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Early in 2024, Emma Sundh, a Swedish author who describes herself as a journalist specialising in sustainability and founder of the Climate Club, published her eighth book, entitled *To Build a Home: Straw, Mud and Recycling*. In the book, Sundh describes how she and her family built their own house out of bales of straw, mud, and recycled materials. It was very much a DIY project in which she purchased straw and pressed it into square blocks of various sizes, felled trees on her land and cut them into boards, gathered rocks and mud from her property to build a foundation, and scoured the countryside for doors, windows, sinks and bathtubs to be recycled and given new life in her home. As she explains:

> Building with straw is not a new idea. The idea of building houses out of bales of hay was developed in North America in the 19th century. … It died out in the 1940s but was revived in the 80s in New Mexico, where you can find newer houses made of hay bales. (Sundh 2024: 76, author's translation)

Sundh points out that the trend has spread to Sweden, where many builders of new houses select straw bales as building material. Indeed, it is part of a growing movement, partly driven by the fact that an increasing number of people want to counteract the climate change processes they sense are occurring around them. However, it is also partially a reaction to rising housing prices and a desire to make the family budget go further and allow for a different quality of life that is not necessarily part of the rat race (ibid.: 55). There are undoubtedly many other reasons people are once again and increasingly turning to straw as a building material.

The following text focuses on the uses and reuse of straw (rye in particular) as a roofing material for construction and repair. To focus on such processes, the text turns to the work and thoughts of a Master Thatcher named Mats and one of his clients, Anders.[1] They both live in Trummelarp, a small village in rural southern Sweden. Interest in thatching and the use of straw as a roofing material declined throughout most of the 20th century in the European context (see Glassie 1982 for a discussion of how this decline occurred in the Irish context), although that trend is currently in reversal. To the extent that a small but growing number of people are interested in roofing their homes with natural and organic materials such as rye and reed, this article investigates and problematises the significance of this movement.

From the outset, the focus of our research was not upon straw, but upon the manners in which museums worked with cultural heritage, and the degree to which economic and financial considerations affected that work. Through our research with several of the museums involved in our study, we met Mats. We went from interviewing Mats to working alongside him in a form of participant observation that intensified over five years, from 2019 to 2025.[2] Indeed, with time, this fieldwork came to approach the style that Trevor Marchand (2010: 2) aligns with an "apprenticeship", noting that, "as a field method it is explicitly geared toward the study of learning in practical contexts where verbal communication is frequently (but not categorically) is secondary import to physical skill and display." In line with Tim Ingold's (2013: 3) distinction between anthropology and ethnography in which the former involves studying *with* people to learn *from* them, and the latter is the study *of* something to learn *about* it, we worked beside Mats for quite a long time before we began to glean what it was that we were actually learning from him. The fieldwork process was an empathetic journey (cf. Sennett 2012:

20–22), fuelled, for our part, by curiosity and wonder. Stylistically and structurally, we have organised the text to reflect the processes involved in that journey, which did not always have a clear destination but was very much about making and building multiple things: from relationships and roofs to knowledge and intellectual insight. But in addition to this, the text is also built up as a sensory ethnography (Pink 2009) intended to illuminate the physical activity involved in doing fieldwork that leads to the production of knowledge.

Our initial aim in working with Mats was to learn more about an ancient handicraft and trade (thatching) from within the practice, a form of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), and understand its relevance in today's heritage industry. In general, amongst cultural and social theorists, cultural heritage is often understood as uses of the past in the present for the purpose of affecting the future (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992: 35–55; Lowenthal 1996: 41–60; 2015; Anttonen et al. 2000), or as a selection shaped in the present that has recourse to the past and will affect the future (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 7; Gradén 2003; Aronsson and Gradén 2013). However, folklorist Valdimar Hafstein (2018: 3) has more specifically defined ICH as the "practices and expressions that do not leave extensive material traces, such as storytelling, craftsmanship, rituals, dramas, and festivals". We find Hafstein's definition fruitful as a means of framing ICH (see Kuutma 2012; 2016). However, concerning the craftsmanship and people we have met in this field, there is reason to pause before dispensing with material culture as entirely as Hafstein does. Mats and many of the craftspeople we work with balk at this description of craftsmanship.

On the contrary, they emphasise how their work is deeply rooted in material culture. Mats argues that his life is all about grain, straw, sheaves and roofs. In his mind, his craftmanship is not intangible but firmly anchored in materiality, such as the soil he tills and the straw he grows and harvests. In a moment, we will return to the themes of materiality and making, but to frame that discussion, we would like to return to straw and thatching.

BEYOND OBJECTS TO MATERIALS: STRAW

Mats quickly points out that straw is a material with an extraordinarily long and intimate connection to humanity. We have been living with straw and under straw roofs for thousands of years. Our disconnection from the material is a recent phenomenon. When the Swedish magazine *Gård & Torp* ran an article on Swedish Christmas traditions and decorations, it was without surprise that the article opened with a lengthy description of the uses of straw to decorate the home. It explained:

> A custom maintained from the pre-Christian era long into the late 19th century was covering the cabin floor with straw. This custom partly protects from the cold by filling the floor's cracks. The straw had symbolic value, pointing to a rich harvest. Beyond that, straw functioned excellently as an extra sleeping place for guests. And not just living guests – according to old folk beliefs, dead relatives visited the living around Christmas time. The soft straw showed them reverence and hospitality. (Tirén 2021: 72, author's translation)

Indeed, the smell of straw in the home marked the presence of an important holiday. And if straw on the floor could symbolically point to a rich harvest that year, Mats points out that unthreshed straw on the roof worked as a food reserve – in waiting – if times became hard.

Material culture has long been the centre of study for ethnologists, anthropologists and folklorists. As Daniel Miller (1998; 2010) points out, central questions that have attracted the attention of scholars include how objects frame the activities we engage in, help constitute identity, and enter circulation through consumption. However, anthropologist Tim Ingold (2013: 21) argues that there is a need to understand material culture in an even more expansive manner. Things can be objects, but they are also materials, and the focus on straw as a material (as well as an object) is essential, because while the thatched roofs that we are interested in here are material objects, they become so through the union of a material, a maker, and an imagination. But the material in this case is not passive. As Ingold argues, materials offer resistance and a realm of possibilities. In Mats' hands, this material is formed, manipulated, and pushed in cultural directions far beyond the ground it emerges from. It does so in ways not even imaginable for a couple of academics like us by harkening back to what it has done in other people's hands over hundreds of generations. The memory of those generations' knowledge lies in Mats' hands. "Thatching a roof", he tells us one day as we are working with him in the fields harvesting straw, "isn't particularly hard! I could teach you to do it in a couple of days!" He then shrugs and laughs. The truth is that Mats cannot transfer the knowledge in his hands to our hands by telling us what to do for a few days; for our hands to learn what his hands know would take thousands of hours of our hands and rye straw engaging with one another. It implies hands-on learning from and with the material (cf. Ingold 2022: 235).

As Ingold (2013: 31) argues, making involves processes of growth and correspondence: "Not the imposition of preconceived form on raw material substance, but the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming". Understanding making in this way has consequences for how one can understand the manner in which the straw of the thatcher entwines with ICH. As we see it, craftspeople engaged in the process of doing their craft do not reproduce or enact aspects of ICH. To the extent that making is growth, Mats's activities are dynamic. The corporeal knowledge in his and other craftspersons' hands is never fixed but constantly changing and developing depending upon the cultural, environmental, and social contexts in which they are practiced (Marchand 2007: 183). Indeed, as Richard Sennett (2008: 120) argues, craftspeople "invest thought in things they can change". And in line with this, we would argue it is the craftsperson's ability to engage with a material and adapt it to changing circumstances that keeps them bound to that material.

For example, the rye that Mats grows can vary slightly from year to year, and each roof he thatches is unique and well-adapted to the environment in which it finds itself. On one project, Mats is concerned about a maple tree and the sap it will drop onto the thatched roof; on another roof, he reflects on how much the roof is subjected to harsh Scanian winds. When working in museums, he strives to be as cultural historically correct in his craft as possible and binds the thatch with hazel branches. Still, when thatching the roof of a private home, he often uses metal wire, which is easier to obtain. As Mats adapts his craft to meet the different criteria facing each thatched roof, the intangi-

ble cultural heritage of his craft grows, develops and transforms as it is practiced. Consequently, thatching today is not culturally the same as it was one hundred years ago.

Indeed, in contemporary Western Society, procuring straws is more complex than one might think. Reed and rye are the most common thatching materials, with reed being the most used thatching material in modern architecture. Reed is a sturdier and more durable material than rye straw. However, most of it is grown in Chinese wetlands and shipped by Dutch firms around the Horn of Africa before being distributed throughout Europe.

Mats has a tiny bit of land on which he grows reeds, but rye is the primary material he works with, which he grows on his farm on a hillside in southern Sweden. Hence, Mats grows the material that will become someone's roof. He uses no fertiliser to cultivate thatching rye. It must grow slowly in meagre soil. As it turns out, his hands know much more than how to work with straw. They know how to produce it, which implies another level of corporeal knowledge embedded in the roofs he makes.

THE GROWTH OF MATERIAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE

During the summer of 2021, we, the two researchers, and four local people spent seven days with Mats, harvesting rye straw and bringing it in. A lot happens before a roof is thatched. The process of harvesting the material began with Mats driving a McCormack tractor from the 1950s with a binder behind it. The binder was a Danish brand created in the 1950s. It cut the straw, bundled it, bound it, and spat the sheaves out to the tractor's left.

Photo 1. Hemp twine used for binding sheaves; here a bundle prepared for the mechanical binder. Photo by Lizette Gradén.
Photo 2. Pre-cut one-metre lengths of hemp twine for binding sheaves by hand. Photo by Lizette Gradén.

The machine called for a large skein of hemp twine to bundle each sheaf; however, in the year following the pandemic, such twine was not available. The lack of natural twine forced Mats to shift to synthetic material. As we began working I, Lizette, was assigned to walk alongside the binder to ensure the sheaves did not get stuck, and when that happened due to the more static synthetic twine, I would manually remove the

Photo 3. Lizette removing stuck sheaves from the binder. Photo by Tom O'Dell.

sheaf from the binder and leave the sheaf to be bound by hand. Whilst Mats' binder is still used during harvest, the same kind of binder appears in the Nordic Museum and Kulturen agricultural collections as examples of machinery from the agricultural past.[3] The binder we were working with in 2021 and subsequent summers could be the only one still in use in Sweden. There were no safety features, and therefore instructions on how to approach the machine were key. Mats demonstrated how it worked, and instructed me to wait until the sheaf hit the ground and then to put my foot on it gently until the binder had fully released it. When a sheaf was stuck and the string tangled the tractor had to slow down or stop to fix it. Mats driving the tractor and me monitoring the binding and release of sheaves called for attentive collaboration.

Aiding the binding process appeared to be a physically easy enough job, although I was then part of a strenuous process of walking up and down the hill, keeping a relatively quick pace. As ethnologist Albert Eskeröd emphasised in *The Year's Crop: Ethnological Studies in Harvest and Christmas Belief and Custom* (1947), binding sheaves was a woman's job in past peasant culture, and I was, in a sense, following their path. The women before me bound sheaves with flexible straw while I used stiffer one-metre lengths of white polyester string that did not match the age of the binder. In 2022 Mats had secured natural fibre and binding was smoother.

The binder left sheaves of rye scattered over the field which then had to be organised into what Mats calls "streets". A street was two rows of straw bundles placed 2.20 metres apart, just enough space for the tractor to move between them, pulling a sled. When it was time to bring the straw in, we worked as teams on both sides, stacking the straw onto the sled. It took two and a half days for the six people to cut, bind, and organise the bundles into streets.

Photo 4. Sheaves of straw have been organised into streets that are just wide enough for the tractor to pull a sled through them so that the straw can be loaded and drawn into the barn. Photo by Tom O'Dell.

But before doing this, Mats assigned me, Tom, the task of assembling the sleds. The sleds, as it turned out, were homemade contraptions that Mats had designed and built, inspired by drawings he had found in old ethnological books. Mats used scraps of flat iron rods and bolted them together to make a frame. Then he attached thick plastic irrigation piping to serve as runners under the sled. The sleds were too large to store indoors once assembled, so at the end of each season, Mats took the sleds apart and stacked their parts on cinder blocks. Putting the sleds back together was like putting a puzzle together. No two sleds were identical, and the parts from one sled did not fit another.

Over the winter, bolts had rusted into place and refused to budge; the holes Mats had drilled into the iron slats did not line up, making it impossible to bolt them together. The only solution was to use an angle grinder to cut off the bolts, then a power drill to bore new holes in the iron slats. For the better part of an afternoon, the area around the barn looked like a mechanical workshop, with sparks flying. By lunch on the second day, three sleds were assembled.

Once assembled, it was time to bring the bundles into the barn, and over the remainder of the week, Mats slowly pulled the sleds down the streets of straw. The rest of us fell into a smooth rhythm of walking beside the sled, bending down, grabbing a bundle of straw, carefully placing it on the sled, moving on to the next bundle, and doing it all again. We repeated this process nine thousand times.

Photo 5. Mats pulls a sled loaded with sheaves of long-straw rye into the barn to be stacked and stored until it is threshed in the autumn. Photo by Tom O'Dell.

When a sled was full, Mats pulled it into the barn. People standing on the sled threw the bundles of straw to others standing further inside the barn, who then neatly stacked each bundle. By day six, the stacks reached the barn's roof. Tom and Mats, along with two younger helpers, used pitchforks to throw each bundle of straw four metres to the loft, where there were two pairs of waiting hands. At the beginning of the week, Mats explained that you can't just throw the straw with your arms, you need to get your whole body into it. On the sixth day, Mats stepped back, watched Tom for a moment, and then said, "I see you've learned the technique for throwing the straw bundles!" Tom nodded, placed the pitchfork on his hip, and thrust the bail of straw up to Lizette. Mats did the same, aiming for another helping hand, then Tom, then Mats. With an even rhythm, the straw found its way into the barn – nine thousand bundles of straw, one at a time.

As the above discussion has shown, and as other scholars have also observed, getting to the point where Mats (or any thatcher) can begin to thatch a roof requires a great deal of hard labour and sweat (cf. Langlands 2017: 165–191). When Mats thatches a roof, he usually stands or squats on the roof by himself with one other person on the ground, throwing sheaths of straw up to him as he needs them. The work appears tranquil and slow, with a roof that feels soft to the touch. However, to succeed in his craftsmanship, Mats needs to know more than the art of growing rye and thatching roofs. He is dependent upon being able to recruit work teams of six to eight people every summer to bring in the rye, and smaller teams of (ideally) three to four people in the autumn to thresh every sheath of rye that has come into the barn. And finally, when thatching, he

Photo 6. Sheaves stacked from floor to ceiling in the barn. Photo by Lizette Gradén.

wants the assistance of at least one other person, in part to facilitate the work and in part to address safety concerns. Should he ever fall off a roof, it is reassuring to know there is someone else there to call for medical aid if needed.

As a master of this craftmanship, Mats performs with excellence and the level of knowledge needed to succeed as a social entrepreneur. Throughout the work process, Mats gives clear, precise instructions to everyone, but he also jokes with the people around him. He tells stories and asks about their opinions on events unfolding in the world around them. The arduous work becomes playful through these comments, jokes, and interactions. And as Miguel Sicart (2014: 25) argues, "Playfulness glues together an ecology of playthings, situations, behaviours, and people, extending play toward an attitude for being in the world". It provides a form of work that could easily be perceived as monotonous, suffocating, and strenuous, with a very different orientation towards camaraderie, teamwork and social commitment. The implication in relation to processes of making and reusing things is that the realm of the social, and how it is organised and managed, is of extreme importance to understanding the degree to which people will want to become engaged in that activity and continue to pursue it. Hands, materials, and varying forms of sociality are, in this sense, integral to crafts (Sennett 2008; 2012). These are processes which Henry Glassie has noted were an integral part of the thatcher's way of living in pre-industrial times. These are processes of connection-making that bring people and nature together, as well as people and people

(Glassie 2000: 28), and they all remain an integrated and central component of Mats' work and craft.

LIVING UNDER THE ROOF

Each day in the week of harvest, we break for lunch and go down to Mats' house, an 18th-century Scanian stone farmhouse with a thatch roof. On one of the days, one of the people working with us, Anders, tells us he needs to drive home during lunch to take care of some business. As the rest of us sit at a table under a willow tree, eating sandwiches and drinking rosehip soup, a sparkle appears in Mats' eyes. He begins telling us another story, this time about Anders. "Do you know where Anders lives?" he asks.

> He lives in the house with a straw roof down the road from your house. Anders bought the house a few years ago. He contacted me to find out how long the roof would last and what it would cost to repair or replace parts of it. He used that information to negotiate the price of the house. Last spring, he asked if I could re-thatch the roof. So, I was frank and told him, 'if you want me to thatch your roof, you have to come up and help me take in the rye!'

He laughed and shook his head. "So that's why Anders is here today! It's not just that he is cheap labour, but I think it's important that he knows where his roof came from, and what goes into making it."

When we later interviewed Anders, his story partially reflected Mats' words, although he also spoke of a different relationship to the rye straw and thatched roof. He had been looking for an old Scanian farmhouse for several years, and when he did find objects he liked, he never managed to win the bidding. But he explains, "So one day I saw this house listed on *Hemnet* [a popular online real estate site in Sweden], and I thought, 'Shit! Are they going to sell that?' I recognised it immediately." His daughter, who went to school in Trummelarp, a village in Skåne County, had friends who grew up in that house. So, he knew the house well but had never been inside. He contacted the agent and, along with two other interested buyers, got an early viewing. "So I came into the garden and then into the house's front foyer. And I just thought, 'I have to have this house. It has my name on it!' It was exactly what I had been looking for."

Anders's manner of describing his relationship with the house fits in well with the process Hartmut Rosa (2019: 137) describes as "resonance": "a multidimensional process that plays out between different psychological levels, between the physical and mental spheres of the subject, and between self and world…Mind and body, self and world enter into a kind of *energetically charged* form of contact."

Mats experienced an immediate, strong connection with the house, which mobilised him to take quick action. It was cheaper than many of the others he had lost the bidding on. Anders bid aggressively and won the following afternoon. However, the thatched rye roof suddenly started to worry him more and more. He had admired thatched roofs, but he was not necessarily looking for a thatched roof. Anders explains that he found the house charming in its totality, but he would have bought it even without the thatched roof. Now, the fact of the matter was that it had a thatched roof, and he was not sure what that meant or implied. The straw on the roof began to take on new vibrant

qualities (cf. Bennett 2010), disrupting the resonance he had immediately felt with the house when he walked into the garden. On the one hand, he was worried about the risk of fire; on the other hand, he was afraid it might leak. The question of how sustainable it would be to own such a house came up in unexpected ways, and different questions about the house's sustainability would soon make their presence felt.

Amongst the papers and documents the estate agent had supplied that described the house was an estimate from Mats of what it would cost to re-thatch one part of the roof. Anders called Mats, and this was the beginning of a long-term friendship. Mats calmed Anders down, informing him that the fire risk was minuscule and leakage wouldn't be a problem since there was a tin roof under the thatched roof. However, despite the old estimate, Mats was not interested in working on the roof. As Anders tells the story, Mats prefers working with museums rather than private customers. Nonetheless, Anders persisted in asking Mats for help, and he accepted conditionally. Anders recalls the conditions in the following way:

> We initially discussed how I would help him harvest and thresh the rye straw for my roof. If he is going to thatch my roof, I must help him produce the straw. So, I started helping. If he were going to thatch my roof at all, I would have to work in his fields. And I worked hard! [Laughing.]

As Anders continues speaking, he makes it clear that he is thankful to be able to do that work. He learned much about thatching and became friends with Mats, and as he reminds us, Mats ended up doing a job he did not want to do at all.

Anders still needs to redo the northern roof of one of his houses, but apart from that, the thatching is complete and Mats is now more than 70 years old. Anders hopes to persuade Mats to complete the last section of the roof soon.

As scholars working alongside Mats for more than four years, we have come to understand both social and material sustainability in relation to the strategies people use to manage limited resources and the degree to which they have access to them. As Anders continues speaking with us and reflecting on his home, he expresses unease about some of the resources he needs to repair and maintain it. Above all else, the limited resource he faces is an intangible cultural heritage – the knowledge of the craftsmanship involved in thatching rye straw, which also includes access to materials. Anders knows no one else in southern Sweden who thatches with long-straw rye. Most of the thatchers in the area work with reeds. Once Mats is gone, Anders has few alternatives. If Mats can complete the last piece of roofing, Anders will be set for the next 30 years, which will be the rest of his life.

In light of this process, Anders says that long-straw rye is a fantastic roofing material. Even after he removed older materials from over 30 years, only the outer third had been exposed to water. The rest remained dry. Despite this, he says he would never recommend installing a long-straw rye roof. He looks at us quizzically and asks, "who would ever do the work, and who could you trust to keep coming back to help you maintain the roof?" Trust is an excellent question when we speak about future sustainability, DIY projects, and how ICH that facilitates sustainability can be given new life in the world we live in today. For Anders, a significant source of trust and appreciation he has for his roof comes via the friendship he has established with Mats, which he describes as "special". And he beams as he looks at the roof, and notes that he helped

harvest and thresh the materials that now keep him dry. And he echoes Mats' words by acknowledging that he thinks it is fantastic that he knows where the straw came from and what went into the process of obtaining the materials for that roof.

CONCLUSIONS

In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Donna Haraway employs the term Sympoiesis to describe the process of "making with", emphasising "that nothing makes itself" or is "self-organizing". Her point is that creative and generative activities are entangled with complex, dynamic, responsive and situated historical systems. Roof thatching can serve as an entry point into sympoetic systems of making, aesthetics, organising, and living in the world.

Photo 7. A sheaf of straw that Mats has bound with a makeshift rope he has made out of rye straw. Photo by Tom O'Dell.

Having worked with Mats as he harvested rye on his farm, we have come to understand vernacular heritage-making as a complex sympoetic affair, a way to connect family, individuals, objects, landscapes, and the stories about them in ways that differ from curatorial practice and museum taxonomies.

The roofs that Mats thatches harken back to a pre-industrial peasant past in which some might romantically imagine that we lived more sustainably and closer to nature. At the same time, the tractors, trucks and assortment of tools that Mats works with are all driven by fossil fuels, and are very much a part of the industrialised era of agricultural production. However, Mats' straw is still more environmentally friendly than any equivalent shipped from Eastern Europe or China. And if "industrialism darkened the picture of the skilled-proud laborer" by making them seem outdated and inefficient, as Sennett argues (2018: 12), or if "mechanization has changed the way we think, the way we build knowledge" as Langlands (2017: 12) argues in his discussion of the significance of traditional crafts, then in many ways Mats and the people eagerly mobilised around him offer a small windows of hope and light for a revitalised interest in proudly honing a skill and the learning processes of slow production. As others have argued, this phenomenon is gaining momentum throughout much of Western society (Gauntlett 2018: 20; Luckman and Andrew 2020; Dana et al. 2022: vii).

With Mats' help, we have come to understand the process of dealing in rye and thatching roofs as a prism of knowledge, a complexity that raises questions about what

we mean when we talk about material and social sustainability and of social engagement. How do relatively modest ambitions, or one person's attempts to stick to old traditions, using old equipment and manual labour and then turn them over to new generations, play into all of this? Ingold (2013: 21) has argued for the need for us to understand the act of making things as a process of growth. As he explains: "even if the maker has a form in mind, it is not this form that creates the work. It is the engagement with materials" (ibid.: 22). In the very first season of fieldwork that we spent working in the fields with Mats, he spent a week talking a lot to us about straw, one might even say he lectured a lot. But periodically, he would pick up a handful of straw, twist it, and suddenly convert it into a piece of rope to tie a bundle of straw together. He would show us baskets, chairs, fences, walls, room dividers and mattresses, all made from straw. What he saw in the straw was beyond our imagination. But after working with Mats and the material he grows and refine for several years, we have come to understood it very differently to how we would have if we had spoken about it for a week. The material and its community, has, so to speak, grown on us in ways we could not have gained through readings and lectures.

NOTES

1 We have changed the names of people and places in the paper to protect the participants' anonymity.

2 Our fieldwork with Mats occurred in repeated short but intense periods when we worked with him on site. This included cutting, binding, and bringing in the rye straw over the course of a week in the summer, spending another week threshing that rye in the autumn, and at times working alongside him on roofs as an extra pair of hands. Formal interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. This was the case for the quotes of Anders that we use in this paper. The quotes from Mats that we present here from working with him in the field are taken from our field diaries, kept during the work sessions. These have also appeared in an unpublished conference paper written a few weeks after we conducted this fieldwork.

3 Examples of these are archive photos in the Nordic Museum (NMA0195597 and NMA 0195592); two objects in Kulturen's collections (KM83341 and KM 46255) and one object in the Uppland Museum collection (UM31174).

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