

My first major article, “Crafts: Second Class Citizens?” was published in the first issue of *Metalsmith* magazine twenty-five years ago. It was a debut for both of us. The article was the start of my project to provoke a more lively discussion of ideas about what we do, as jewelers and metalsmiths. We’re both still at it: *Metalsmith* is still publishing, and I’m still writing. For the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Metalsmith*’s first issue, Suzanne Ramljak has invited me to look back on “Crafts: Second Class Citizens?” to see what’s changed and what has remained the same.

It can be embarrassing to reread one’s old writing. It’s like looking at your old student work. Some of it makes you cringe. In “Second Class Citizens,” I equated aesthetics and art criticism, which is hardly true. I centered my definition of craft on medium, process, and function. Today, I would add history to that list, and I would replace function with a broader idea that points to traditional formats, rather than utility. Otherwise, I find the article a fair description of the condition of craft at the time.

Basically, “Second Class Citizens” was an analysis of why craft had been relegated to the margins of the art world. Well, things have changed. The 2004 Whitney Biennial featured the work of Judith Schaecter and Anne Wilson, who both use craft materials and technologies unapologetically. Josiah McElheny’s installations were included in the 2002 Biennial. Reviews of artists in craft mediums like Kathy Butterly appear regularly in *Art in America*. At the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, jewelry from the Helen Williams Drutt Collection is exhibited alongside painting and sculpture in theme shows. The new generation of curators and writers coming up through the ranks do not share the prejudices of their seniors. However, the top prices for fine art remain much higher than those for craft. You could say that craft is now the poverty-stricken little sister of art, not a second-class citizen. Still, that’s progress.

Many younger craft practitioners are totally at ease with the strategies of conceptual art, and incorporate that way of thinking effortlessly into their work. While little of this work is recognized in major artworld circles, it demonstrates that the marriage of art and craft has produced viable offspring, many of which speak a dialect of craft. In metalsmithing, my favorite among these is Myra Mimplitsch-Gray, who continues to produce hollowware that is intelligent, well-made, and even useful. Her context is emphatically craft, but her thought process is very much informed by conceptual art and Postmodern theory. Such work would have been unthinkable 25 years ago. Mimplitsch-Gray’s work is a fusion of traditional craft practice and contemporary art, and it’s work like hers that stands the best chance of finally being recognized as “art” in the fullest sense.

Back in 1980, my fondest desire was to see all craft recognized as art: to see jewelry next to paintings in art galleries; to see clay pots accorded the same status as installations in museums; to know that every curator in the country takes weaving just as seriously as performance. I no longer want this. Over the years, I have come to think that there are certain kinds of craft that simply are not art in any meaningful sense. To cram them into the same box as art is to radically misinterpret them. In fact, I say the same of design.

I visualize the three fields (craft, design, and art) as partially overlapping, like three circles that share a common area in the center and overlap each other on the edges, but each also occupies some space that is merely its own. Some craft is also art (or should be, in a perfect world), but some craft is just craft. That is to say, art is a distinct category of ideas and objects and phenomena, all very interesting in its own right – *but so is craft*. I now believe that craft has its own distinct identity, and to submerge that identity within art would be to erase it. In other words, I think some craft properly belongs in its own category, and should never be interpreted as a kind of art.

From my study of craft history, I have come to believe that craft as we know it is a recent invention. In the 1860s, William Morris imagined a new decorative art (as craft was called back then) that would embody certain virtues: it would be made by hand; it would be beautiful; and it would be accessible to all. These three virtues were the basic aspirations of the entire Arts and Crafts Movement. But the Movement sputtered out after the First World War. In one of the great ironies of history, Morris's vision of "art for all" became a clarion call for the Bauhaus. His vision was taken up by industrial designers, many of them true believers in the power of mass-production to bring good design to the masses. However, the spirit of making beauty accessible to the widest possible audience remains alive in a certain segment of contemporary craft: the women and men who make production craft. These people are the true inheritors of Morris's vision. They preserve his intentions better than anybody else. Similarly, they preserve the distinct identity of craft – the one that remains stubbornly outside of art – better than anybody else, too.

The way I see it, their work doesn't belong in the Whitney Biennial, and it shouldn't be reviewed in *Art in America*. It's not art. The work is too conservative, too comfortable, too concerned with ordinary experience, to fit into the relentlessly progressive model of contemporary art. Its business is familiar beauty, not ceaseless invention. But this is not a bad thing, not at all. This kind of work should be honored and respected – and analyzed – on its own terms. Production craft deserves much more serious attention than it gets. It needs a champion, a present-day William Morris who can speak to the ambitions of production craft, and say exactly why it has an important place in the 21st century. Any volunteers?

It's unlikely that anyone will step forward. In "Second Class Citizens," I wrote at length about the Romantic sensibilities of many people in the crafts. Other than a few college teachers and mavericks, most craft practitioners are not skilled writers: they tend to favor the direct experience of making over verbalization. At the time I wrote the article, I did not understand the negative side of the Romantic tendency: craft is afflicted with a profound anti-intellectualism. There are a number of people who distrust all writing, and who find any analysis of craft to be a betrayal of all they hold dear. The worst of them attack any attempt to analyze craft with a hatred that continues to surprise me. While this is not new, the bitterness of such attacks seems to have grown in direct proportion to the amount of critical writing that appears in publications like *Metalsmith*.

One of my chief complaints in "Second Class Citizens" was about the "weak tradition of writing about the crafts." I was partly wrong: both the British and the American Arts and

Crafts Movements generated a substantial amount of writing. But I was right when it came to contemporary writing. Luckily, the body of good writing about contemporary craft has grown substantially since 1980. In ceramics, Garth Clark recently published an anthology, and just this year he was awarded the College Art Associations Mather Award for significant critical writing. Dozens of other writers have published monographs on notable craft artists. Over the years, hundreds of catalogs and commentaries about modern craft have appeared. These are all signs of maturity in the field. In jewelry and metalsmithing, the pages of this magazine are graced by excellent pieces by Tacey Rosolowski and Glen Brown, among others. In the crucial area of critical writing, things are looking up.

Another notable shift concerns what I called the “five-year-lag-syndrome.” I accused the crafts community of taking up developments in the fine arts too slowly, thus looking like the whole field was behind the curve. But there’s no real curve anymore. The visual arts have fragmented and split; there’s no identifiable avant-garde. Artists return to styles and ideas developed decades ago, finding rich veins for exploration. Conceptual art first appeared in the late 1960s, but far from being outmoded by more recent movements, it’s a pervasive influence in all segments of visual art practice. Other movements like earth art and minimalism have their own influence, and forms like installation and performance and painting and even bronze casting all remain vital. The notion of a single movement dominating the scene is obsolete. Plus, Post-Modernism permitted a mix-and-match sensibility that treats all forms and movements as interchangeable parts, to be combined at will. In this atmosphere, it’s nearly impossible to lag behind. Everybody is even because nobody is in the lead.

Still, there’s one aspect of the crafts that hasn’t changed much. In 1980, I wrote, “Why don’t we speak about the crafts as having distinctive ideas and attitudes that separate them from painting and sculpture?” This project has barely been started. For some reason, the British are more interested in speaking to issues that inform all craft practices, and a number of symposia and publications have been devoted to all the craft mediums. But in the US, each medium seems to exist inside its own little ghetto, and commentary seems mostly to focus on concerns native to particular mediums. And while that’s certainly necessary, it’s also extremely important to speak about all the crafts, and to explain why craft is relevant in the 21st century.

Why? Because crafts are viewed as a single unit from outside. From the inside, a weaver might think her craft has nothing whatsoever to do with jewelry. How is a loom like a hammer, anyway? But from the outside, all the mediums appear to be bunched together in craft departments, craft shows, and craft galleries. And this perceived unity is particularly important in the academic community, where all the crafts must justify their continued presence. Deans, Presidents and Boards want to know: why are we still teaching crafts? What’s the point? And the field’s failure to present a cogent defense for its existence as an academic discipline has resulted in the closure and shrinkage of many programs nationwide. Like it or not, college programs create the future health and prosperity for all the crafts. Most young practitioners get introduced to their crafts in a college course, and many future customers get their first taste of handmade objects there,

too. If a persuasive argument for *all* the crafts cannot be mounted, then *all* the crafts will suffer.

The justification for teaching craft at the college level used to depend on two arguments evolved during the Arts and Crafts Movement. One argument held that all the visual arts were equal, and that any craft practice was the equivalent of painting or sculpture. The other argument held that handwork developed a balanced character, and both mind and body should be equally nurtured. For different reasons, both arguments have failed. Contrast the condition of craft education on campus with the status of intercollegiate and intramural sports, and you'll see the impact of that failure.

As far as I can tell, the argument for craft must focus on those “distinctive ideas and attitudes” that belong to craft alone. If an college administrator can be persuaded that craft offers something unique to itself, important to the larger culture, and sophisticated enough to merit study at the highest level, then the field will survive. If not, the crafts will diminish, and we will become the buggy-whip makers of the 21st century.

Looking back, looking ahead, I see reasons for both optimism and pessimism. I suppose I would have said exactly the same thing in 1980. On the whole, though, I have to say that things are better now. I don't have to wear shades to gaze upon the future, but at least I can be modestly optimistic.

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