

Contemporary Craft: A Brief Overview

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COMMENT: This essay was first delivered as a speech at the Harbourfront Center in Toronto in 1999. Like most craft historians, I date the beginning of modern crafts back to William Morris. He was the first to consistently place crafts in a much larger social context: labor, social justice, environmentalism, consumerism. Morris treated crafts as both the product and subject of discourse – and so brought them into the Modern era. This essay traces the transformation of studio crafts from the trades to what they are now.

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My initial mandate from Jean Johnson was to provide a "thorough overview/ background - going way back to include the Renaissance, Industrial Revolution, Arts & Crafts Movement, Bauhaus - from Bruce Metcalf's particular point of view". Well, that's a tall order. Given that I used to teach a semester-long course on the subject, and that even with 14 weeks I had to omit certain parts of the history of contemporary craft, I don't think I can give you much in the way of a thorough overview. Since I'm compelled to condense this subject into a mere 40 minutes, I have to paint this picture with a very, very broad brush. So, my apologies in advance. You're going to get a pretty subjective overview here, light on background and heavy on point of view.

The subject here is contemporary craft. We're talking about the making of objects removed from necessity - we don't need handmade objects to survive, anymore - and we're talking about a collective response to industrialization. These, to me, are the two basic facts about modern crafts. In other words, craft as we know it, is a recent invention. It is not an antique. It is not a picturesque holdover from a distant bucolic past. Actually, modern craft went through two reinventions: once in England starting in the 1850's , and second time in Europe and North America after World War II.

Now, "craft" is a tricky word, with no precise definition. This is a symposium about craft, but it's doubtful that there are any plumbers or roofers here, confused that this might be a conference about building trades. So, we all know roughly what the word means, in the sense of The British Crafts Council, or the American Craft Museum.

But we would also all probably argue about precisely what the word means. So, I'll say that "craft" is a cultural construction, not some independent fact. And, parallel to Arthur Danto's idea of the artworld, I'll also say that there is a craftworld, and that the institutions of the craftworld effectively get to decide what the word means. Finally, I would say that the meaning of the word "craft" changes as societies change, and people tailor the word to their specific needs and desires.

Before the Arts & Crafts Movement, what we now think of as craft, had several related implications. The first was skilled work, in the sense that we now speak of the "craft" of writing or the "craft" of cooking. This sense of craft harkens back to mystery and magic, as in witchcraft, and suggests that skilled work is a form of secret knowledge.

Craft, from our retrospective view, also meant the decorative arts. Generally, this term denoted hand-made luxury goods for use and display inside buildings, and for use and display on the human body. The use of the word "arts" suggests a certain high-toned quality, setting up an opposition between a couch, and, for instance, a hand tool. The couch might wind up in an art museum, under the purview of a decorative arts department, but the tool remained anonymous and invisible, not worthy of preservation until the early part of this century.

Craft also meant trades and folkways. That is to say, there were long traditions of pre-industrial production of hand-made objects, from roof thatching and chair-bodging, to weaving homespun and carving treen. Some of these trades became professionalized, organized into guilds and unions, as with metalsmithing. Over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, some of these trades adapted to industrialization, as the trade of metalworking evolved into the trade of machining. Other trade skills, like hand-setting type for printing, faded under the onslaught of modern technologies.

Folkways, which tended to take place in and around the home, were eroded by the availability of mass-produced consumer goods. Why weave a coverlet when you could buy one at the local store? But various folk traditions continue in pockets, particularly on the margins of consumer culture. A few of these traditions even survived long enough to become celebrated and exploited, as in Navajo weaving and pottery.

All these senses of the word "craft" survive today. I hear advertisements promoting "hand-crafted" beer, which reflects the idea of craft as skilled and careful work. Obviously, the decorative arts are healthy, particularly in well-funded museums and in the antique marketplace. And the trades are doing just fine, as long as they serve the needs of homeowners and industry. And folk crafts survive, particularly in poor countries where mass-production has not fully penetrated the marketplace.

But the "craft" that is the subject of this symposium, is not fully any one of these categories. It's my contention that the craft under discussion here is a recent invention, a social adaptation in the face of industrialization. In fact, I could reasonably claim that modern craft was invented by William Morris, when he decided in 1856 to furnish his apartment on Red Lion Square. Morris and his buddies had a collection of pseudo-medieval furniture made up, which they intended to paint with scenes of chivalry and legend.

I would suggest that Morris created a new category of objects. These things were not only luxury interior decor, nor were they only the products of a trade. They are craft in the fully modern sense. They had several important characteristics, which were fleshed out over the next 40 years of the Arts & Crafts Movement.

First of all, they were theorized. They were both the product and subject of discourse. Like many of his contemporaries, Morris was profoundly influenced by John Ruskin, and particularly by the passages from "The Nature of Gothic" that talked about labor. Ruskin was speaking directly about the differences between carving Gothic architectural ornament, and carving Classical ornament, and stating emphatically that the quality of labor was vastly different. It took no special imagination to see that Ruskin's critique could be applied to factory labor of any kind, and that "The Nature of Gothic" addressed social conditions of Victorian England. So, while the Neo-Gothic style was hardly new, it was new to regard furniture as being aligned with a social critique. With Morris, craft entered a world of

theory.

Secondly, while Ruskin was speaking about the dignity of labor, Morris practiced it. Morris carved wood, embroidered, painted furniture, dyed fabrics, wove tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, set type and printed books. Perhaps it's difficult to imagine how shocking this must have been to his contemporaries, for whom painting was about as far as a gentleman could go in the world of physical labor. But Morris got his hands dirty, and he was legendary for getting completely engaged in one type of handwork or another. He spent several years with his hands and arms dyed blue from indigo: he literally carried the stain of hand labor. I think Morris broke an important barrier, for he made it possible for his many followers to engage in work that had previously been reserved for the lower classes. He gave handwork a classlessness that survives to this day.

Not only did Morris pull handwork out of the working classes, but he put women's work on an equal footing with men's. Morris was an early enthusiast of embroidery, and stitched objects became an important staple of the Arts & Crafts Movement. While it's true that embroidery was often the preserve of women, it's also true that the many Arts & Crafts exhibition societies would place these embroideries on equal terms with the work of men. In fact, stitchery became an icon of reform: when the Belgian painter Henri Van de Velde started to embrace Arts & Crafts ideals, his first notable work was a fabric appliqué, "Angel Watch", in 1893.

Van de Velde's defection was not unusual. As the Arts & Crafts Movement progressed, and as it became allied with the Aesthetic movement, it was generally held that art and craft had equal aesthetic potential. Much of this attitude might be traced to the era's great admiration for imported Chinese and Japanese ceramics. So, it was not unusual to find an aesthete having her portrait painted along with an admirable vase, the whole mise-en-scene amounting to an argument for parity between pots and paintings. And many painters behaved as if this was true. For instance, Edward Burne-Jones painted on furniture and designed jewelry. Others, like van de Velde, gave up painting for careers in design. In general, a craft object was assumed to be able to satisfy the same level of expectations brought to a painting or a sculpture. Beauty was not confined to the fine arts. Of course, such open-mindedness was short-lived, and craft has again been demoted to the status of aesthetic also-ran.

To me, the most important contribution of the Arts & Crafts movement was to tie aesthetics to social awareness. As I said, one of the movement's primary inspirations was Ruskin's "Nature of Gothic", and the crucial passages are his critique of the mechanization of human labor. Ruskin had the vision to critique architecture on the basis of how it was made, and how the laborer was forced to work. These passages are a key document of the Movement, and they remain, in some ways, an urgent message.

Ruskin's genius was to move attention away from a "disinterested" contemplation of an artwork, and toward a broader examination of the society from which the work emerges. Before the fact, Ruskin challenged the doctrine of Greenbergian Modernism, and the whole concept of the autonomous art object. It was no accident, then, that Morris became a socialist, or that the Bauhaus was concerned with the well-being of the working class. To my way of thinking, the alignment between craft and social engagement for the next century, can be traced back to Ruskin.

In its original form, the Arts & Crafts Movement was a reaction against the dominant

culture of its time: against mass-production and shoddy goods, against factory labor, against ugliness, and against capitalism. In the twentieth century, I think most observers have conceded that the factory system is unavoidable, and that a more legitimate complaint is against the exploitation of workers rather than the existence of the system in the first place. Similarly, we have seen that not all mass-produced goods are bad, and that machines are capable of making very good, useful, and even beautiful things. And, some of us have concluded that the socialist dream of state ownership of the means of production can lead to crimes and inefficiencies at least as great as those of the capitalist system.

But I think it's important to remember that craft is still an opposition, just as it was more than a century ago:

Craft still stands against the anonymity of mass-production, and for the personalized object.

Craft still stands against ugliness, and, on occasion, for beauty.

Craft still stands against big-money capitalism, and for small-scale entrepreneurship.

Craft stands against corporate labor, where most workers are replaceable parts in a bureaucracy, and for individual self-determination.

Craft stands for the rich potential the human body at work, and against disembodiment in all its forms.

Craft continues to be a social movement, often intuitive and without leadership. I see craft as a collective attempt to relocate personal meaning in a largely indifferent world. As a teacher and observer, I constantly see how craft functions as a vehicle to construct meaning, and how it gives substance and dignity and grace to individual's lives. Furthermore, I suggest that any history of contemporary craft would have to account for this fact.

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The first reinvention of craft had international repercussions in Germany and Austria, in Scandinavia, and in the U.S. and Canada. It supplied a persuasive argument for the production of a new kind of handmade object - one with an ideological grounding - and energized thousands of people for decades.

In England and the U.S., the Arts & Crafts Movement had lost much of its momentum by World War I. It had become strongly identified with a particular visual style, and that style had become passé. In the States, one of its most passionate leaders, Elbert Hubbard, went down on the Lusitania in 1915. Gustav Stickley, the other great American popularizer of Arts & Crafts, overexpanded his business just before the war. His Craftsman Workshops collapsed, also in 1915.

But Arts & Crafts ideals lived on in people like Bernard Leach and Eric Gill, and in institutions like the manual arts education movement in the United States. After the turn of the century, teaching crafts became an important part of higher education, and not just in art schools. For instance, I heard it said the Wisconsin State University system once required all students to take at least one manual arts course. One of these courses was

pewter-working, and to this day Wisconsin continues to be a center of that particular craft.

Arts & Crafts ideals also survived, somewhat modified, in the teachings of the Bauhaus. While the later Bauhaus emphasized new materials and new technologies, the Bauhaus program also insisted that every student master a particular material. The theory was that, before one could design effectively, one must thoroughly understand how a material could be worked. And, of course, for many of the workshops, the other goal was industrial production, for which handmade objects might serve as prototypes.

In the Bauhaus workshops, craft was first tied to the concept - and the style - of modernity. The form of Modernity was held to be geometric, free of ornamentation, and highly abstract. The teapot designs of Marianne Brandt illustrate the Bauhaus style perfectly. But Modernity was held to be far more than a style: it was intended as a kind of manifesto. First, the unadorned, geometric form language was held to express the new industrialized society, as a visual analog to machines themselves. Second, the Bauhaus style was claimed to be simple, hygienic, and affordable, thus improving quality of life for the masses. And thirdly, the style represented a collaboration between individual designer/craftsmen and industry. The individual designer suppressed her desire for idiosyncratic self-expression, for the higher purpose of serving society. If there is an anonymity in late Bauhaus design, it was fully intended.

What you have is an ideological shift away from Ruskin's concern for the laborer at work. The Bauhausers apparently assumed that mass-producing its designs in some factory would be bearable, at least. I have never found a single reference to the quality of labor, when it comes to the Bauhaus products. Instead, the Bauhaus, in spite of its socialist leanings, focuses attention on the laborer at home, as consumer. Presumably, the laborer would be made happier by having his Bauhaus chair, lamp, table, and carpet. And, it should go without saying that the Bauhaus emphatically rejected the historicism of William Morris's medievalism. According to the theory, modern style could not accommodate history.

It was the alignment of Modernity and handwork that produced the second reinvention of craft, particularly in the United States. Some readers may be familiar with the story about U.S. servicemen and women returning to civilian life in the late 1940's, and the passage of the "G.I. Bill". This legislation provided a free college education to any ex-soldier who wanted it, and one result was an exponential growth in craft education at the college level in the U.S.

Many of these ex-soldiers were deeply suspicious of the regimented life in the armed services, and were looking for an honorable vocation in which they could remain relatively independent, and be their own boss. In addition, those few soldiers with some visual sophistication were stimulated by the ferment in postwar artistic culture. This was the era of "free art" and "free jazz", when European avant-garde met the native culture of be-bop. Art and music were throwing off the conventions of representation and orchestration: the new art was abstract and improvised. To be an artist was to be a pioneer. In this atmosphere, craft work offered a way to participate in the new visual culture without having to starve: a marriage of art, self-determination, and business.

The story of the metalsmith Ronald Pearson is not unusual. After a stint in the Merchant Marine, Pearson took classes at the School for American Craftsmen, but never graduated. While still a student, he bought an old spinning lathe, made a chicken coop into a studio, and went into production. At different times he was a retail shop owner, designer for a

large jewelry manufacturer, and operator of his own jewelry production company. All of his work was informed by the prevailing tastes in Modernism: simple, elegant, and adventurous. Like Jack Lenore Larson, John Prip, Harry Bertoia, and many others, Pearson could produce his own work, and also design for industry. He worked comfortably in the marketplace, making objects for interiors, for the home, and for personal adornment. Pearson was a true "designer-craftsman", in the sense promoted by the Bauhaus.

A slightly later development was the idea of the "artist-craftsman". In this model, the craftsman looks to the artworld for a stylistic or conceptual framework. Of course, in the fifties, that meant abstract expressionism. And obviously, in American crafts, the most prominent example of a craftsman embracing the ethos of Ab-X is Peter Voulkos.

Voulkos started out as a talented and somewhat iconoclastic potter. The story goes that Voulkos taught a ceramics course at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1953, and then visited New York as a guest of M.C. Richards. There he met Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Robert Rauschenberg and others, and got a close-up look at the New York School. Back in California, he started to punch and rip and stack his clay, making pots that can only be described as abstract expressionist. Like an "action painter", Voulkos would energetically throw his medium around, improvising until he achieved a satisfying abstract composition. Presumably, Voulkos's pots expressed some agitated inner state, and there are dozens of pictures of Voulkos at the wheel, grimacing wildly, making sure his audience knew he was chock-full of untamed emotion. These pots exploded on the national scene in the fall of 1956, featured in a major Craft Horizons article. Crafts have never been the same.

I should point out that Voulkos, like many of the artist-craftsmen (and women) who followed him, was subsidized. He taught from 1954 until 1985, and the teaching job afforded him a great deal of freedom and flexibility. It's a lot easier to be an artist when you have a regular paycheck coming in.

I also find it interesting that the socialist leanings of English Arts & Crafts and of the Bauhaus, were rarely taken seriously in the United States. In fact, I don't believe anybody, anywhere, seriously thinks craft can be an effective agent for inciting socialist revolution. The grand overhaul of society envisioned by Morris and many others, seems to have become a dead issue. Perhaps a few craft practitioners think that their work can be a reminder that social justice is still a noble and necessary goal. However, I think most craftspeople think about personal empowerment: they see craft as a device to control their own means of production. Craft gives thousands of people the dignity of their own labor, and a certain degree of independence. As I see it, these are the goals of Ruskin's critique, achieved on an intimate scale, and without overthrowing the system. The craft studio represents capitalism with a human face.

At any rate, the two paradigms that I have described - that of the craftsman/businessman, and that of the craftsman/artist - remain the two most influential models in North American craft today. One model is a bit more beholden to a marketplace economy, and the other to an atmosphere of theory and scholarship. Either model usually operates within the limits of Modernism or Post-modernism - take your choice. These two paradigms also describe a schism that plagues each of the craft mediums: a little war between production-oriented craftspeople and art-oriented craftspeople. In crude sexual terms, the business types accuse the art types of masturbation, and the art types accuse the business types of prostitution. Most outsiders find the quarrel incomprehensible, but it has parallels in almost every profession. It's true, however, that craft-as-art gets more institutional perks.

Teaching, writing, exhibitions, museum collecting, and even symposia like this one, are all heavily skewed in favor of craft-as-art.

I should also mention that there are other paradigms available: craft-as-hobby; craft-as-replication (like the furniture makers who produce perfect reproductions of Shaker cabinets or Windsor chairs); or craft-as-vocation (like trade jewelers or farriers). Each of these types of craft generates its own subculture, with its own values, rules, heroes and villains. I find all of them interesting, but I must confess to knowing very little about them.

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At this point, I want to make a few remarks about history in general, and craft history in particular, because we are here to produce both a record of our collective past and an agenda for our collective future. History impacts on both activities.

History is a construction. It is the imposition of a narrative on the chaotic jumble of events. It seeks to impose an order which may be entirely synthetic, and is subject to the whim and politics of the historian. It is backward-looking by nature: it is a survey of what has already happened. History cannot predict the future, but it can give us some useful signposts for navigation.

In my experience, history usually consists of two basic activities. The first is editing. Whoever tackles the business of history must select some items for consideration (and thus preservation), while at the same time ignoring far more. The historian cuts and cuts and cuts, and the little bit left over makes it into the article, speech, or book. The editing is ruthless.

The second activity basic to history is writing. History is written, and usually appears as a text on a page. Or, as Wendell Castle once said to me, history is written on the secondary market. All this means that history is not an objective report, but is colored by theory, scholarship, politics, and a cash-exchange economy. And inevitably, writing about craft is a translation, from a tangible object to a text. As with any translation, something is always lost.

So, I wonder: what will the history of contemporary craft look like? Who will make the cut? What will be recorded?

The obvious and cynical answer is simple: the big stars will make the history. The record will probably consist of Leach and Hamada, Voulkos and Arneson, Castle, Albert Paley and Bill Harper, Dale Chihuly, Libensky and Brychtova, Claire Ziesler, and a few others. So far, mostly men. These choices can be seen as a cumulative sum of: the number of times one has appeared in print; the number of pieces in major museum collections, and price points. Craft history almost writes itself: all you have to do is assemble the usual suspects and say it's the official record. It could easily become a history of personalities, not of objects.

Not surprisingly, this would also be a list of those who most expertly promoted themselves (like Dale Chihuly), those who were most diligently promoted by someone else (as Voulkos was promoted by Rose Slivka), or those who made the biggest objects. In the last case, maybe Arnie Zimmerman and Howard Ben Tré both get added to the list. Most of them would be called "artists". Few of them can present a specific theory about the nature of contemporary craft.

I suspect this is the way the history of craft will be written. I would hate to see it happen, but it probably will.

I think there could be a more serious history. Obviously, I'm engaging in pure opinion now, but whatthehell? I told you at the beginning, this speech consists mostly of my personal point of view.

To start with, I maintain that craft is not the same as art. Although the two categories are related, they are not identical.

A craft object must, before all else, be made substantially by hand. Obviously, most people have come to accept the use of machinery, but the essence remains. Objects that are made without substantial handwork, or that are made in very large numbers with mechanically repetitive hand labor, are not commonly regarded as craft. Tupperware, tennis rackets, typewriters, or folding chairs: we don't think of these things as being craft.

Craft also depends on the respective mediums, techniques, formats, and histories that are traditionally associated with its disciplines. "Ceramics" implies the use of clay, the techniques of working clay, traditional forms of clay objects like the vessel, and the long pan-cultural history of clay objects. Each craft medium has its own list of traditional associations. Of course, part of the twentieth century craft enterprise has been to adapt new techniques (like electroforming), new formats (like computer stands), or even new materials (like plastics), but the traditional associations still constitute a center for craft. I would say that it's not a matter of either/or, but a matter of degree. There are degrees of craftness. The more an object manifests traditional craft mediums, techniques, formats, and history, the more craft-like the object is.

Obviously, many of the most interesting objects in the craftworld today are hybrids: they take characteristics of both craft and art. There are craftspeople who make installations, craftspeople who make useless objects from found material, craftspeople who put on performances. But the less an object manifests the craft attributes I mentioned, the less of a craft object it is. Thus, there are some things that I don't think are craft in any meaningful way. For instance, in 1975 Margie Hughto invited a series of painters and sculptors to work in clay at Syracuse University. One of the results was Larry Poons, slinging wet clay at a wall, in a manner similar to the way he was handling paint at the time. It might have been an interesting event, but I don't think it was craft in any meaningful sense.

That is to say, craft has inherent limits. Craft must retain a sense of the object; craft must be substantially handmade, craft might engage its own traditions, but craft cannot fully partake of the openness of contemporary art. Craft cannot be anything at all.

I find Arthur Danto's thesis about contemporary art to be very useful. Danto, a philosopher, found Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes to be very interesting. He couldn't find a way to visually distinguish Warhol's boxes from the real thing - let's say he doesn't have a craftsman's eye for detail - and he started searching for a definition of art that would encompass the fact that, in this century, art is often indistinguishable from plain old, everyday objects. His solution had two parts. First, Danto determined that art is embodied meaning. That is to say, the only thing that ties together all the many and varied types of late 20th century art, from paintings to performances, is that they all signify some kind of specialized meaning.

Danto also proposed that there is a community that is equipped to decode these meanings, and he called it the artworld. But the upshot of Danto's thesis is that art can be anything at all. (Danto has a wonderfully patrician way of saying it: "Art can be anything ah-tall.") As far as I can tell, Danto's thesis works. It's an accurate and inclusive way of describing the whole range of artwork in this century.

But if craft cannot be anything at all, it must be philosophically different from art. Most of my colleagues think I'm splitting hairs when I make this assertion. The usual response is to suggest that craft can embody meaning, too, and therefore art and craft must be philosophically the same. But I don't think so. Danto's thesis proposes an open-endedness that is not available to craft. By its nature, I believe craft must have limits, and those limits are philosophically significant. Exactly how, I'm not enough of a scholar to say just yet.

In the past fifteen years, many observers of contemporary craft have suggested that art and craft have merged, or should merge. Implicit in such assertions is that, philosophically, craft as we know it and art as we know it are the same thing. But in an atmosphere wherein art is regarded, in essence, as a conceptual activity - as the embodying of meaning - I think that arguing that art and craft are the same thing is wrong.

The conceptualist bent of contemporary art is blind - utterly blind - to some of the most important attributes of modern craft. The artworld has no use for the fact that craft objects are made by hand, and that learning a craft is difficult and demanding. Within the artworld, a "craft" is typically regarded as mere skill, incapable of embodying a consistent artistic vision or a complex philosophical statement. Furthermore, the artworld has nothing but contempt for the way that most craft objects are designed to be used in a domestic setting, or the way that craft objects are frequently employed in the non-monetary economy of gift-giving. Nor does the artworld value the many histories of craft, except when a certified artist might condescend to call attention to it. Although these many dismissals of craft attitudes and craft values are breaking down, they are still commonplace in artworld capitals.

Thus, it's my contention that any discourse on craft history or craft theory that looks to art for its philosophical framework or its vocabulary, is doomed to misrepresent its subject. If craft and art are not the same, then craft history and art history cannot be the same; craft education and art education cannot be the same; and craft theory and art theory cannot be the same.

So, it's my hope that this symposium will dwell upon those aspects of craft attitudes, practice, theory, and education that have no counterpart in the artworld. I would hope that the other speakers here focus on those attributes of craft that are different. Too often, people habitually interpret differences as signs of inferiority - or superiority. However, differences can simply denote a shift in category, or a change in attitude. As craftspeople, we don't have to cringe or boast. But I think it's imperative to underline the differences between craft and art.

As I said, craft in this century is a recent invention, even as it has roots in pre-industrial technology. That combination of social awareness and respect for tradition gives modern craft a unique identity; one that is rarely explored. For the next two days, we have the opportunity the opportunity to do so, and I hope we will.