

THE ART GLASS CONUNDRUM

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I speak to you today as both a maker and a scholar. Over the years, I have come to several basic conclusions, which I can summarize as follows: Craft is not the same thing as art, although the two fields have much in common. Art these days gives visual form to meaning. That's the requirement. As Arthur Danto says, art is essentially embodied meaning. Craft, however, has no single essence. It's something of a grab-bag of different attributes, none of which is necessary. For instance, while handwork is important, we now have craft objects that are not handmade. Think of computer-controlled Jacquard weavings or jewelry made with Rapid Prototyping machines. Among the other attributes of craft are craft mediums (like glass), craft techniques (like glassblowing), craft formats (like the vessel), and craft histories. The way I look at it, the more of these attributes a craft object has, the more craft it is. There's no black-and-white here, only matters of degrees.

Personally, I am troubled by assertions that craft and art are the same. These claims have been made for decades now, usually by somebody who aspires to the status of "artist," with all the perks and price points that come with the job. Of course, it's clear that many craftspeople are artists. But I would also say that none of the five attributes I named (handwork, craft mediums, techniques, formats and history) have to be manifested in an artwork. In the interest of intellectual clarity – and honesty, I might add – I can only conclude that art and craft are not the same thing.

So, it bugs me when people assert that somehow craft IS art. These assertions take many forms - like the name of the Glass Art Society. By conflating the word "glass" with the word "art," this organization insists that glass IS art. Wow. We can all go home happy, secure in the knowledge that every maker who works in glass is an artist.

I say: Baloney. I say: What's wrong with being a craftsman? What's wrong with attending to the elements that properly belong to craft? I say: Be proud of who you are, and quit whining about gaining entrée to the temple of Art. Screw Art.

However, there are consequences that follow from insisting that craft is not art.

(1. ONSCREEN IMAGE: METCALF NECKLACE)

In my practice, I do not shy away from them. I insist that I'm a jeweler. If somebody wants to call me an artist, I won't object, but it's not a word I apply to myself.

My jewelry is intended to be worn. My work is also unapologetically decorative: one of its purposes is to ornament the human body. I show you this work so you know where I stand, and I practice what I preach. I may say some pretty harsh things later on, and I don't want to be accused of being a hypocrite.

I also want to say that practicing a craft isn't an excuse to be stupid. The studio crafts are subject to some of the imperatives of modern art: to be thoughtful and inventive among them. In the trades, one can slavishly follow custom and fashion, and one doesn't have to ask why. The same for hobbyists. To my mind, the studio crafts are distinguished from both trades and hobbies by a spirit of inquiry, by a refusal to be content with the conventional.

So, in the spirit of inquiry, let me make a proposition. I'm going to show you two images, both of objects made from glass. I think that most of the makers in this audience would prefer to make one of these objects, and not the other.

(2. ONSCREEN IMAGE: DANTE MARONI VESSEL)

Here's one of Dante Maroni's vessels, which demonstrate his extraordinary skill as a glassblower. And I think most makers in this audience would be proud to have made this object.

(3. ONSCREEN IMAGE: CHRISTOPHER WILMARTH, “SUSAN WALKED IN,” 1972)

On the other hand, here’s a sculpture by Christopher Wilmarth, who was associated with the Post-Minimalist movement in the 1970s. This piece, “Susan Walked In,” is in the collection of the Hirschorn Museum in Washington, DC.

My guess is that fewer of you would want to have made the Wilmarth sculpture because the process of making would be less interesting. That is, no particular skill was demanded in the fabrication. As for the Maroni, I think lots of people wish they had that kind of skill, even if they have never touched a blowpipe.

What I hope to suggest here is that this audience is probably more impressed with craftsmanship than art. Given the choice between a beautifully made piece of glassblowing and a sculpture that used plate glass as a formal element, the majority of you would probably chose the glassblowing. You would chose the making, the skilled craft. And, I must insist, there’s nothing to be ashamed of in making that choice.

Here’s the lowdown: GAS is a society of makers. Among makers, skill is a high accomplishment. For evidence, consider the number of technical demonstrations at this conference. Or the number of tool vendors. Or the level of skill displayed in the works in the auction fundraiser. I think it’s safe to say that one of the most important questions in this society is not why, but how.

Next, I want to show you some recent sculpture that got big exposure in the New Museum’s inaugural exhibit in 2007. The show was called “Unmonumental.” This is what cutting-edge sculpture looks like today.

(4. ONSCREEN IMAGE: ELLIOT HUNDLEY, “SIBYL” 2006)

Most of the sculpture in “Unmonumental” was characterized by a thoroughgoing casualness in fabrication. Most of the art supplies that went into their fabrication were

found objects. One artist's sculptures were made entirely from discarded cardboard boxes.

(5. ONSCREEN IMAGE: SHINIQUE SMITH "ARCADIAN CLUSTER 2006)

Here's one made of old clothing and a chair. I can't say I cared much for it.

I think these artworks lack some of the fundamental attributes of objects that would interest about 90% of all glass craftspeople. And this is aside from the fact that they're not made of glass. Consider: the artworks evidence no loyalty to any particular medium. As a consequence, they are not particularly well made. What they do is engage an ongoing discourse about art itself, and sculpture itself, and relationship of both to the larger world. They are the logical inheritors of Duchamp's urinal and Rauschenberg's combines. Anything goes.

But in the end, anything does NOT go in the GAS community, does it? Most obviously, this community favors a single medium – glass. And that means a certain collection of processes comes into play. So let's face it: GAS is a society of makers. This is a club for people who make stuff of glass. In that respect, it's much like SNAG or NCECA or any of the other craft medium groups in America. So forget for a moment about the claim about art in this society's middle name. Let's consider the consequences of making.

VIRTUOSO TECHNIQUE

(6. ONSCREEN IMAGE: PAUL STANKARD, "CLOISTERED BOTANICAL..." 1988)

Glassblowing, casting, flameworking and even flat glass offer an endless variety of technical challenges, each one of which is interesting in itself. Making surface textures, finding ways to vary of making form and line, reviving of historical techniques or inventing new ones: the craft of glass has an unlimited variety of techniques. And each new process offers new experiences and new aesthetic possibilities.

In a society of makers, virtuoso technical exerts a magnetic pull. For many, mastery of the medium is either good in itself or necessary for high artistic accomplishment, or both.

For a maker, virtuosity can be incredibly seductive. Every committed craftsman serves a long apprenticeship to his material. Every maker can recall their first stumbling efforts to gain control over a reluctant medium – and all craft materials are reluctant in their own ways. For myself, I remember dozens of broken sawblades and failed solder seams. No doubt, many of you remember heavy, blobby forms in hot glass, and the years it took to finally make the glass do exactly what you wanted.

Everybody needs to have goals – objectives that stand just out of reach, but that we might achieve with diligent practice. In his book “Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience,” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi says that one secret of contentment is setting goals we can achieve, but which provide enough difficulty to force us to concentrate all our abilities in the achievement. As humans, we take great satisfaction in overcoming challenges. Whether it’s learning to play a Chopin Minute Waltz on the piano or fitting the body of a vessel in a perfect axis on its stem, we thrive on a manageable difficulty. And because any craft can be divided into steps that require increments of increasing skill, any craft can become the source of great satisfaction.

There are many reasons why technical virtuosity might become an end in itself. Makers place an emotional investment as they accumulate skill – and who could expect otherwise? The satisfactions of learning the command of a medium are considerable. Most makers also stand in awe of truly great craftsmanship. As insiders who have struggled with our mediums, we recognize extraordinary skill when we see it. It’s impossible not to compare highly accomplished skill with our own – often lesser – efforts.

(7. ONSCREEN IMAGE: RENE LALIQUE “NARCISSE” CA. 1899)

In jewelry, Lalique’s work will always stand as an example of world-class craftsmanship. Here is jewelry made of the finest materials, worked by some of the most skilled men to

ever touch metal, stone, or glass. In studio glass, I know that Lino Tagliapietra evokes a similar sense of awe.

(8. ONSCREEN IMAGE: LINO TAGLIOPIETRA “BILBAO” 1996)

For some, it’s inspiring to see great craftsmanship. It’s no accident that virtuosity – as in control over a material or an instrument – and virtue – as in superior morality – have the same linguistic root. Both terms connote excellence.

After all, great virtuosity requires an innate gift: a talent for a medium that is usually quite rare, whether we are speaking of ballet or guitar playing or glassblowing. Virtuosity also demands patience and practice – sometimes years of practice.

There’s solid evidence that practice – and the skill that results from it – actually re-wires the brain. We emerge from learning a craft with an altered brain physiology. Truth be told, many craftspeople find the challenges of learning new techniques addictive, and they always hunger for more.

Plus, there’s the possibility that the attainment of skill changes our character as well. This is the proposition that’s at the heart of Richard Sennett’s recent book, “The Craftsman.”

(9. ONSCREEN IMAGE: COVER OF SENNETT)

He proposes that good craftsmanship is good for you and good for the larger society, too. While the linkage between handwork and morality is questionable, most makers recognize that they are changed by the pursuit of their craft. The exact nature of the transformation is debatable. We all know brilliant technicians who are mean-spirited people, but I would trust a great craftsman long before I trust a bad one. At the very least, craftsmanship teaches patience and discipline, and these are qualities that can have broad applications in life.

IS TECHNIQUE A TRAP?

I already talked about virtuoso technique, and how seductive it can be. In the world of rock n' roll guitar, musicians admire each other's chops: passages of guitar work that are learned, practiced and repeated in performance. And it's the same in glassblowing. Certain passages of technique are learned and repeated. Having invested time and energy in a specific move, what's the incentive to throw the technique away? The investment demands repeated application of the same set of chops, over and over. Harvey Littleton was wrong: technique is not cheap. It's expensive. This is one of the basics of craftwork, and it has been true for thousands of years.

(10. ONSCREEN IMAGE: RICHARD MARQUIS TEAPOTS 1988-1990)

Glassblowers have been obsessed with chops since the early days of the studio glass movement. One of the first to study abroad to secure a set of distinctive skills was Richard Marquis. You probably all know the stories about his time in Venice. Dante Maroni is much admired for the precision of his forms.

(11. ONSCREEN IMAGE: BILLY MORRIS "GARNERING #3" 1991)

And of course there's the king of chops: William Morris. For many glassblowers, a repertoire of chops becomes the basis for their signature style. Instead of trying to reinvent the wheel every time, blowers return to their own distinct skill set.

But there's a trap in virtuoso technique. To return to my analogy to guitar players: rock n' roll chops are all about a conspicuous display of dazzling technique, usually in the form of blinding speed or difficulty in the fingering. Remember back in the day when Eric Clapton was THE guitar God of the world, revered for his lightning-fast speed?

In contrast, the saying in jazz is, "The best ones always play it cool." It was Doug Heller who told me this. What he meant was that jazz musicians don't think that the display of virtuoso technique is a good thing. The best musicians deal in understatement. They restrain themselves. They put their knowledge and craft to the service of the performance.

What you have in glass is a fetishization of technique. I mean, look at all the demonstrations on the schedule of this conference. Sure it's entertaining, all that fire and motion. It's all chops, all the time. But what happens when technique is put front-and-center, and the jazzman's cool gets pushed to the side?

I think this emphasis on great technique leads directly to decorativeness. To get a return on investment, chops have to be repeated. And the temptation is to put the best chops front and center, like a guitar solo. Chops are about display, and about elaboration. The over-proud glassblower wants to make sure everybody sees how fabulous her technique is, so she underlines it and repeats it. If one great chop is good, two is better, three better still.

So the chop-based motif proliferates, grows, and in extreme examples, takes over.

(12. ONSCREEN IMAGE: LITTLETON & VOGEL, "IMAGO BAG," 1997)

How else do you explain this work? This object is about one thing: the conspicuous display of technique, repeated with minor variations. The colors changed, the number of bags, whatever. In repetition, these things were drained of all meaning, if they had any in the first place. Ultimately, they exist only as pretty decorative objects.

IS GLASS ART REALLY SCULPTURE?

If the implicit claim is that glass is art, it follows that because it's three-dimensional, it's sculpture. Oh, really?

Sculpture is not just a bunch of 3-D objects. It's a discourse, like all the other forms of fine art. It's an extended conversation, or more properly a debate. Mid-modern sculptures were abstract forms, built for visual pleasure and interest. (13. ONSCREEN IMAGE: HENRY MOORE "MOON HEAD" 1964) Henry Moore and David Smith were among the most important among abstract sculptors – and we're talking 1960 here. But since then, the conversation about sculpture has taken many twists and turns. One response to

art theory in the 60s was reductivism: the project of discovering the essence of sculpture. Boiled down, sculpture is pure, simple form, shorn of associations and complexity.

(14. ONSCREEN IMAGE: RICHARD SERRA “SIGHT POINT” 1971-75)

Thus Tony Smith and Richard Serra. Later sculptors said that the proper direction for sculpture was horizontality: Walter DeMaria. Others insisted that sculpture should be sited outside the clutches of the gallery system: earth art. Still others located the site of sculpture in the body itself: performance. Later still came the intersection of sculpture and conceptual art, as in the work of Art & language and General Idea.

(15. ONSCREEN IMAGE: CAI GUO-QIANG “LIGHT CYCLE” 2003)

And then there was the expansion of sculpture into installations, leading to spectacular productions like the fireworks of Cai Guo-Qiang. More recently still, there’s a type of sculpture that’s built of the debris of consumer culture, downscale and informal. While the progression isn’t linear, each type of sculpture was produced in response to other types. Minimalism was partly a reaction to the overheated emotionalism of abstract expressionism. Land art and body art objected to the commodification of art in the marketplace. The new assemblage sculpture is a critique of expensive art spectacles. But you get the point: sculpture is a discourse, an ongoing and collective thought process.

(16. ONSCREEN IMAGE: BRUCE CHAO “STEM WARE” 2003)

Some glass makers have participated in the conversation. Bruce Chao continues to make site-specific sculptures; Thurmon Statom developed his splashy painted houses during the heyday of neo-expressionism. Josiah McElheny makes installations that have been exhibited in venues like the Whitney Biennial. Glass as performance and glass as installation increasingly occupy the attention of Generation-Y glass makers.

(17. ONSCREEN IMAGE: MARTIN BLANK “SYNCOPATED RED” 2006)

But the mainstream of glass has focused on smallish, technically sophisticated objects that do not partake of the sculpture discourse. My view, and the view of majority of the artworld, is that most glass is not convincing sculpture. It lacks a consistent engagement

with the discourse. And if its not convincing sculpture, its not convincing art. There, I've said it. Glass often makes the claim without taking the responsibility.

But why subject glass to a field that is unsympathetic to its own culture? Why try to compete with sculpture? Why let the artworld dictate the terms of the debate? Like all the craft mediums, glass has its own internal discourses. One of them is the fetishization of virtuoso technique. Another is about the vessel, probably the oldest purposes to which glass has been put. Another is the sheer beauty of the medium, and whether to accentuate it or obscure it. And then there's decoration: how to accommodate it intelligently; how much to let history into the picture; how to marry decoration and invention.

American studio glass has been dealing with decoration right from its beginning. As soon as somebody wound a thread of glass around a blown form, decoration became a subject. Since many of the early American glassblowers were ceramists first, decorating a glass bubble probably seemed natural. It didn't hurt that the market for Tiffany glass was taking off at the same time people like Littleton and Joel Philip Myers were producing their first mature work.

(18. ONSCREEN IMAGE: JOEL PHILIP MYERS "C.F. BLUE HGD" 1989)

Here's a vessel by Myers from the late 1980s. It bears the traces of abstract expressionist painting, especially the way the threads stand in for drawn lines and the way the floating blocks of color recall the paintings of Diebenkorn or even Rothko. But it also is decorated by the way ceramics pots are, with the motifs wrapping around the form. One thing that makes it interesting is the way the decoration on the back bleeds through to the front.

(19. ONSCREEN IMAGE: MARVIN LIPOFSKY "BEZALAL GROUP 2005 #2")

I would go further than applied decoration, though. I think most studio glass is decorative in itself. Take this recent piece by Marvin Lipofsky. The colors on the surface are decorations in the classic sense, and you could argue that the voids are decorative too. But imagine this object in someone's home, where much of Lipofsky's work probably resides. As long as it isn't competing with too many other similar objects, it would serve

as a visual focal point in a room, an accent of color and light. And while I doubt that glass artists are terribly interested in having their work called decorative, I'm sure that's how much of it is used in the real world.

I suggest that glass is primarily a decorative art. And this might be part of the conundrum of glass: confusion about what it really is. I could be wrong, but I detect a certain nervousness – or even shame – in the glass field about its decorative nature. My sense is the field is so invested in the semi-fiction that it produces Art – meaning sculpture - that it finds any other view threatening.

DECORATION AND MODERNISM

(20. ONSCREEN IMAGE: BENN PITTMAN BED)

In the 20th century, decoration became something of a taboo in both art and design. Decoration was associated with the excesses –wretched and otherwise – of historicism and eclecticism. Decoration became associated with a type of decadence: an endless recycling of motifs that originated in other times and cultures. It's interesting to recall, for instance, that the style of reform in 1860s England was warmed-over Gothic. Critics called for a new style that belonged entirely to the present. After detours into inventive decorative styles like Art Nouveau, Viennese Sezessionstil and Art Deco, the Western world finally settled on Modernism – (21. ONSCREEN IMAGE: MIES VAN DER ROHE, FARNSWORTH HOUSE) – unadorned form in fully contemporary materials like steel and plate glass. While the prohibition against applied ornament that characterized high Modernism is gone, the idea of decoration still arouses considerable suspicion.

The typical rationale goes like this: decoration is applied to an underlying structure. As such, it obscures the structure, which is better off left naked and truthful. Furthermore, decoration has no important meaning. It's just silly froufrou that distracts from the serious business of concept and structure.

(22. ONSCREEN IMAGE: MARCEL BREUER B-3 CHAIR)

This rationale can be applied equally well to design, architecture or artworks. We're all familiar with the dictum "form follows function" – Well, that was a call to arms against decoration. In painting, formalism accomplished much the same kind of radical elimination: anything that did not contribute to the formal structure of the painting should be eliminated. Decoration was equated with decadence, corruption and low, low culture.

(23. ONSCREEN IMAGE: ROBERT VENTURI, VANNA VENTURI HOUSE 1961)

But when something is repressed, it often returns with unanticipated power. By the late 1960s, the proscription against decoration came under assault from several directions. First, architectural theorist Charles Venturi declared that buildings were more vigorous and humane if they had some of the complexity that only decoration could provide. He espoused the "decorated shed," as he called it: a modernist box with details applied to both exterior and interior. Many of Venturi's details were semi-abstractions of historical motifs like the Palladian window or the string course. It's hard to imagine, but these simple elements were outrageous in their day. Architects rightly understood that Venturi had opened the door to the whole world of decoration.

(24. ONSCREEN IMAGE: ETTORE SOTTsass "CASABLANCA" 1981)

By the late 1970s, decoration re-emerged in force. In architecture and design it returned as Postmodernism, with Memphis design occupying a logical extreme. Although Memphis looks dated now – the design equivalent of big hair – it's irreverence and playfulness were a breath of fresh air. In the fine arts, there was the Pattern & Decoration Movement, as practiced by painters like Robert Kushner and Kim MacConnel.

(25. ONSCREEN IMAGE: KIM MACCONNEL EXHIBITION VIEW)

It's useful to remember that both Memphis and P&D were theorized. Neither were simply intuitive reactions to the repressive regime of high Modernism. Memphis was a conscious critique of high Modernism. It also gave designers permission to treat history as a vast library of motifs, with no restrictions. P&D proposed a new kind of painterly structure,

one of juxtaposition and abrupt transitions between discrete passages of patterns. All three ideas remain viable to this day.

To my thinking, there's another corrective element to decoration that is not often articulated. Decoration humanizes the lived environment. Most people – and I'm talking about ordinary people, not arts professionals or academics or tastemakers – most people crave elaboration. A building devoid of decoration usually seems cold and forbidding.

(26. ONSCREEN IMAGE: MIES VAN DER ROHE SEAGRAM BUILDING)

I visited the Seagram Building years ago. It's an icon of Modern architecture, One of the things that struck me about the building is that the secretary's spaces were filled with potted plants. All that pristine glass and steel was insufferable; it needed something green and growing and even slightly chaotic to make the space habitable. We might paint our walls white, but most of us crave a spot of color and a change of texture at the very least. We use images and objects to add variety and visual interest to the places we live and work.

(27. ONSCREEN IMAGE: MY DINING ROOM)

More importantly, we use images and objects to personalize our spaces. Most modern interiors are profoundly anonymous, and most of us find this anonymity alienating. What do we do in response? We put up pictures; we shop for distinctive furniture; we put souvenirs here and there. We make our spaces our own. We decorate.

Businessmen may have discovered that undecorated buildings are cheaper to build, and bureaucrats may think that undecorated rooms have the advantage of offending no-one. But the real people who live and work in those buildings crave color and contrast and complexity. They want to individualize their spaces. Think what something as simple as a picture calendar does to personalize a cubicle.

DECORATION

I have been insisting for a long time that there is no shame in saying that you're a craftsman or a craftswoman, and letting the claim about being an artist go. Similarly, I think there's no shame in being identified with the decorative arts. A quick review of auction houses and blogs will show that the term is rapidly moving out of the museums and into contemporary discourse. When Bonham's sells craft on the secondary market, the material is all called decorative arts. It's a useful distinction, for it clarifies some essential difference in intention between crafts and sculpture. While a few glass artists are accepted into the artworld – Josiah McElheny being the most prominent example – most of us craftspeople won't have that kind of luck. As for myself, I always say I'm a jeweler. I might think about issues that emerge from the artworld, but my work is clearly and emphatically jewelry. Why not just tell the truth, then?

I propose that glass is, at its core, decorative art. Furthermore, I'm suggesting that glass makers have a great deal of expertise in the design and making of decorative art. And last, I'm saying that decoration is entirely justifiable both in the contemporary art lexicon AND in the larger world of human needs. While I don't know what people discuss in glass departments today, I think decoration should be on the agenda. Is it?

It certainly has been on the agenda of ceramics. Since the 1980s, a number of ceramists have been mining the history of ceramics itself. The first impulse may have been to replicate historical techniques and styles, and there was a generation of potters who tried to imitate the calligraphic decoration of, say, Ogata Korin. (28. ONSCREEN IMAGE: BERNARD LEACH STONEWARE VASE 1957) So here's the grandfather of Anglo-Japanese pottery decoration, Bernard Leach.

But ceramists have looked much farther afield since Leach's day, and they are no longer content to imitate historical prototypes. Historical means are put to contemporary ends.

(29. ONSCREEN IMAGE: ANNE KRAUS "ENDURANCE" BOWL 1985)

Here, Anne Kraus borrows decorative elements and technique from medieval Iranian ceramics, but the imagery is completely of her own time. Her subject is the trials and

tribulations of being an artist, including dealing with critics and failure, which she represents as being banged on the head with a falling rock.

(30. ONSCREEN IMAGE: BONNIE SEEMAN UNTITLED TEAPOT 2006)

One of my favorites among the ceramists who trade in decoration is Bonnie Seeman. At first her teapot looks pleasantly Baroque, if a bit loud in color. But then you realize the striations represent muscle, and that orifice is some unidentified body cavity, perhaps a vagina. Once you notice the bugs, attraction is quickly turning into repulsion. Seeman takes historical forms and twists them beyond recognition. I should also note that some of the details on Seeman's pots are lampworked glass.

Maybe I'm out of touch, but Americans have only begun to explore decoration in glass. Lampworkers do, of course, but that's only one tradition. There's engraving, mostly done by Eastern Europeans, and there's all the Venetian techniques that have made their way across the Atlantic.

(31. ONSCREEN IMAGE: DETAIL OF MOSQUE LAMP, EGYPTIAN, c. 1340)

But what of enamel on glass, either Arabic or European? How about mosaics, reverse foil engraving, staining and stippling? There's an enormous library of resources out there, and Americans have plenty of material to explore.

If you have been paying attention to current trends in design, you know that a number of star designers are looking into the decorative arts. There's probably more pattern in high-end design than there has been since the 1950s. Combined with contemporary materials and ingenious design solutions, decorative arts are being revived in some very interesting ways

(32. ONSCREEN IMAGE: TORD BOONTJE, "MIDSUMMER" LAMPSHADE)

Here's an icon of the new decorativeness, Tord Boontje's "Midsummer" lampshade made of Tyvek. Until Boontje got ahold of it, most people thought Tyvek was an inelegant building material. Now it's a popular material for lighting fixtures.

I think there's an increasing dissatisfaction with the plain surfaces of Modern design. Innovative designers like Marcel Wanders and Hella Jongerius borrow historical decorative motifs freely, using them for both surface pattern and for forms. One of my favorite Wanders designs is an oversize chandelier in a vaguely Baroque form – made of papier maché. (33. ONSCREEN IMAGE: HELLA JONGERIUS “RABBIT BOWL” FROM NYMPHENBURG, 2004) And Jongerius is working with the Nymphenburg factory in Germany, casting porcelain animals out of old molds – in this case, from the 1920s.

If you think about it, you realize that hotshot designers are beginning to appropriate from craft traditions. They realize there are lots of fabulous ideas lying around in the closets of craft history, most of them ignored. Taken back out into the light and given a twist or two, craft vocabularies not only look fresh and original, but they advance the discourse of design. In contrast, what are makers themselves doing? Wishing they were artists?

(34. ONSCREEN IMAGE: DANIEL MICHALIK CORK CHAISE LONGUE)

There are a few adventurous makers who are entering the design world. Several of Rosanne Somerson's furniture students have introduced production designs in the New York market, with some success. Daniel Michalik, for instance, has taken his expertise in woodworking and fashioned a line of composite cork furniture that is now distributed nationally.

So, how about glass in high-end design? I'm here to tell you it's pretty unimpressive. If you look through the design books and catalogues and websites, most of the glass is disappointing. The majority is warmed-over Modernist forms, even when they are made by hand.

(35. ONSCREEN IMAGE: BOONTJE AND WOFFENDEN, “TRANSGLASS” COLLECTION FOR ARTECNICA, 2006)

One of the most famous of recent glass designs is this: wine bottles that have been sawed off, sandblasted and reassembled by anonymous workers in South America. It's designed as a series of unique objects by Tord Boontje and Emma Woffenden. And it's in the Museum of Modern Art's Design Collection.

OK. Here's a hypothetical question for every glass maker in the audience: Couldn't you do better than this?

I think there's a terrific opportunity here for adventurous glass makers. You have an expertise that appears to be absent in the design world, not just in your material but in a distinct approach to decoration. With some fooling around and repurposing, I think glass makers could make – or design – some pretty interesting things. Certainly, it wouldn't be too hard to improve on the designer glass in the marketplace today. I won't tell you it's easy to succeed in the design world – it's not – but there's a wide open territory here, just waiting for pioneers.

GLASS AND KITSCH

(36. ONSCREEN IMAGE: JOHN WOOLEY “THE WHEEL OF FIRE” ca. 1993)

John Perreault, in a recent review of a woodturning show, accused much of the work on display of being “tabletop kitsch.” It's an ingenious term, for it foregrounds two aspects of the craft-as-art phenomenon. First, Perreault implies that craft techniques often limit scale. Ceramics is limited by the size of the kiln, silversmithing by the size of the metal blank you can hold over a stake, glassblowing by the weight of the gather. There are ways to get around these limitations, usually by piecing elements together. For instance, we all know Chihuly's vast chandeliers. But generally, if the maker doesn't have a factory team at her disposal, the size of the things she makes is modest. Most of them fit on a tabletop. Most of them fit comfortably in a living room. While that's not necessarily a bad thing, the ordinary scale of craft – and most glass – stands in sharp contrast to the scale of contemporary sculpture.

These days, sculptures fill entire buildings. (37. ONSCREEN IMAGE: OLAFUR ELIASSON “THE WEATHER PROJECT” 2003)

But more importantly for the purposes of my discussion, Perreault points to a pervasive kitschiness that seems to infect some craft fields. Woodturning has this problem. So does glass.

There’s no precise definition of kitsch, but it has to do with the saccharine, the cloyingly sentimental, the ridiculously familiar, and the exclusion of all things challenging or critical. Kitsch is calculated to do two things very well. It’s designed to appeal to the widest possible audience, not just to an elite of arts professionals. And it’s designed to move product. Obviously, the two functions dovetail nicely.

(38. ONSCREEN IMAGE: HUMMEL FIGURINE)

For instance, Hummel figurines are kitsch. This is not realism, but carefully orchestrated sentimentality. They are relentlessly cute, relentlessly upbeat. They resemble dolls as much as they resemble actual children, and thus play on our emotional attachment to both babies and toys. They are not art, they are products. They are also very popular. A lot of people love Hummel figurines.

Frankly, is some so-called glass art is kitsch too. Let me give you an example, one that is based on abstraction rather than a reworking of neoclassical figurative art. But it bears much the same relationship to serious sculpture that Sister Hummel’s designs bear to 19th century figuration. The ultimate source of this glass kitsch is minimalism, particularly the work of Tony Smith. (39. ONSCREEN IMAGE: TONY SMITH “DIE” 1962)

I’m thinking of Jon Kuhn’s glitter-boxes. (40. ONSCREEN IMAGE: JON KUHN “COMPLETED QUEST” 2009)

I have no doubt that these things are very well made and represent a terrific amount of highly disciplined work. I’m suspect Jon Kuhn spent a considerable amount of energy

researching adhesives and different types of glass, and that a long period of development went into the invention of these things. But the whole point of this object is to sparkle. That's what it does. It's like a thousand diamond rings on steroids. It twinkles like nobody's business, and that's pretty much it. There's an internal composition to the sparkly elements, yes, and the color scheme might change from one piece to the next. But the variations are overshadowed by the thousands of internal reflections. As works of art go, it's one-dimensional. It's all about the seductive appeal of fractured light. Beyond the glitter, there's no contribution to the history of sculpture, and only a marginal connection to the history of decorative arts. (One could draw a lineage from cut glass, I suppose.) There's no discourse, no challenge. It criticizes nothing. Despite Kuhn's romantic titles – "Total Clarity," "Mystic Light," "Timeless Melody" – it gives you little to think about. It's all appeal. It's kitsch. Sorry if I'm breaking the news to anybody here, but it's kitsch.

As far as Art-with-a-capital-A goes, Kuhn's glitter-boxes are pretty weak. But you know what? They're amazingly popular. People love these things. I attended one of the Museum of Arts and Design's gala dinners a few years ago, and part of the extravaganza was a selection of work in a silent auction. There were some great pieces of craft on display: an Olga DiAmoral weaving, a Michael Lucero ceramic head. At dinner, I sat next to a young banker and his wife from Scarsdale or somewhere. Both were friendly people from far outside the circles of the craftworld. When I asked them which piece in the auction they like best, they both answered the same way. They really liked the Jon Kuhn.

Everybody knows that light passing through transparent glass is incredibly seductive. There's something wondrous about those reflections, that glow. It's not hard to make something in glass that is incredibly appealing. And that appeal bothers elitists. To be honest, I count myself as an elitist, by the way. We think that art might be beautiful, but we're troubled by artworks that are relentlessly seductive and unsubtle. We don't want to be clubbed over the head with visual allure. We prefer complexity. But elitists are in the minority, and lots of people disagree. Glass is popular, almost by nature.

Which brings up another conundrum for glass. Who is the audience? Is glass made for insiders like me, or is it made for the banker and his wife from Scarsdale? This is an important question, because it calls up the question of whether craft is democratic or not.

When I wrote the book on the history of American studio craft, one of the things I learned is that modern craft has a very strong grassroots component. Fine art does not. Art has long been of and for an elite, a small cadre of professionals and camp-followers who have been inculcated into the various codes and mysteries of the culture. Change in art is always top-down, emerging from artists and their support system. But craft is a different story. Modern craft was an invention of the British middle-class, people like architects and writers and the occasional tradesman. In this country, craft was taught and disseminated by dozens, maybe hundreds of arts and crafts societies, of which middle-class women played an important part. American craft history also traces back to poor Native Americans who made Pueblo pottery and poor African-Americans who made seagrass baskets. More recently, hippies, hobbyists and housewives have all made contributions. Change in craft often comes from the bottom up. Craft can be quite democratic. Or, as I accidentally type sometimes, democraftic.

So, who gets to make determinations of taste? Me, or the banker and his wife? I don't know the answer. Maybe glass is trying to speak to both audiences at the same time. Maybe glass proposes a middle way, an inclusive artform that is welcomed by both tastemakers and ordinary people. In many ways, that's what William Morris envisioned 140 years ago, when he talked about bringing art into life. He hoped that craft was for all classes, and all kinds of people. So if a Jon Kuhn piece brings pleasure and delight into the lives of a couple from Scarsdale, who's to say it's wrong? Is my taste more important than theirs? On the other hand, there's always H.L. Mencken, who is reputed to have said, "Nobody ever lost money underestimating the taste of the American public."

(41. ONSCREEN IMAGE: ROY LICHTENSTEIN "THE KISS" 1961)

Me, I like my kitsch at a distance. Artists have been mining kitsch for the best part of a century, ever since Picasso glued a piece of printed caning onto one of his paintings.

Then there was Pop Art, with its cool appropriation of comic book imagery. By isolating a single panel and blowing it up to the scale of a “heroic” abstract expressionist canvas, Lichtenstein transformed kitsch into art. He didn’t give it to us straight. He twisted it to his own purposes. For those who know, there was an implicit criticism of Ab-X painting built in to the innocuous imagery, along with any number of wry jokes.

(42. ONSCREEN IMAGE: RICHARD MARQUIS “POTATO LANDSCAPE PITCHER” 1979)

For the same reason, I enjoy Richard Marquis’s appropriation of souvenirs, toys and dumb household articles. Supposedly, this is a pitcher, which is not a traditional glass form. Marquis’s version is solid glass, completely non-functional. Its failure of utility is underlined by the completely inexplicable glass potato, and underlined still further by the souvenir supporting the whole shebang. The sand-filled paperweight is kitsch, true, but it’s thrown together with such an odd combination of other things that the whole becomes a whimsical joke, a jab at the pretensions of glass art, and perhaps a commentary on American popular culture. I figure Marquis intends this object to fall into a netherworld between categories. Is it high craft? Sort of, but the sand-filled paperweight is clearly from another context, and the canes appear to be rather sloppily glued on. Is it decorative art? Yes, but it seems to be thumbing its nose at the whole idea. Is it art? It’s complex and it supports multiple readings, so to my thinking, it is. What the gatekeepers think, I have no idea.

As for the seductive qualities of glass, I think there are better ways to deal with it than the way Jon Kuhn does.

(43. ONSCREEN IMAGE: JUDITH SCHAECHTER “ENIGMEDUSA” 2006)

One of the best in the business of light and glass is Judith Schaechter. She understands that light filtered through colored glass is about as transcendent as mortal experience allows. But she also realizes that, short of glorifying God, glass must be put to more complex purposes. For her, glass must talk about life as she knows it: a messy jumble of exaltation and sex and death. There’s God, yes, but also Eros and Thanatos. Because life

is complicated, the glory that glass transmits so effectively must be balanced with a measure of abjection and sorrow. The two opposing forces don't exactly balance, but produce a weird internal tension. I love Schaechter's work because it remains in a state of irresolution. We don't know the outcome of the story, even though I suspect Judith is a closet optimist. In my opinion, this is art, good art. Jon Kuhn's work is decorative art, an entirely different enterprise.

The third and last conundrum I want to talk about is about appropriateness of glass to the art enterprise. If glass makers do not accept a role in the decorative arts, if they reject the option of design, and if they truly aspire to be artists, then they have to question their loyalty to the medium. I'm sure this is an issue that gets a lot of play in this community, especially in the schools, but I'll provide my view on the question.

Let's imagine that glass makers actually make sculpture that is recognizably contemporary, that engages in the issues and styles of the present day instead of the past.

(44. ONSCREEN IMAGE: CAROLE PILON "LES CORPS ETRANGERS 6" 2006)
No more budget surrealism.

(45. ONSCREEN IMAGE: BEN EDOLS AND KATHY ELIOT "GOLD CURLED LEAF" 2006)
No more swoopy forms, pretending to be serious sculpture.

Instead, glass artists will have to make compelling objects that are not driven by technique or material, but by an idea. That's the deal these days: everything must take into account the strategies of conceptual art. If you make art today, you must have a system of reasoning that generates the visual result. And that system must be articulated, hopefully not just with artspeak. Furthermore, that system has to explain and justify the use of any given material. Glass will have to be used for what it is and does, not because it's the only medium the artist can deal with.

The default for art supplies these days are found objects and materials. The artworld can understand a skeleton made of rawhide dog chews. (That was a piece by Tim Hawkinson.) But the artworld has a hard time understanding virtuoso technique. Nobody cares how a thing is made, unless the process of making is both meaningful and, frankly, abstracted from ordinary usage. Furthermore, the artworld understands glass only when some kind of logic is provided for its use.

(46. ONSCREEN IMAGE: LIBENSKY AND BRYCHTOVA, "ARCUS I," 1990-91)

If I were to nominate artists who use glass in a way that is entirely appropriate to their underlying ideas, it would be Libensky and Brychtova. By carefully modulating both the thickness and the surface of glass, they made sculptures that were original and compelling. The effects of light in a sculpture like "Arcus I" suggest both a halo and an open door, while the form remains completely abstract. Poetry and pure form dance together nicely. While I suspect this kind of abstraction is now outmoded, I truly admire Libensky and Brychtova's work. Here, both glass and skill have a reason, and neither is overplayed.

If I were to predict the future, I would say that glass artists will have to avoid most of the seductive qualities of glass. Strong color, transparency and reflection will be used with caution. Glass will be more sober, more translucent and matte, more industrial. Actually, I think this has already happened.

(47. ONSCREEN IMAGE: DANIEL CLAYMAN "PIERCED VOLUME" 2007)

Daniel Clayman came to glass with a background in theatrical lighting, so it's logical that his sculpture should focus on the interplay between glass and light. The form is straightforward, the technique accomplished but not thrust into the foreground. The colorless frosted glass does all he needs it to do. Properly lit, I suspect this sculpture glows in a way that no other material could. It shows how effective glass can be, if used with restraint. There's not a trace of showmanship here, nor any of the insistent pandering one sees so often in glass. Because Clayman deploys glass with intelligence and without flashy effects, this work is convincing as sculpture.

There is a semiotics of glass, and I think artists will become more attentive to its meanings. For instance, glass was an icon of modernity to early 20th century architects, particularly in Germany. To them, the building of the future would be transparent and visually weightless, made entirely of glass. I have yet to see a studio glass artist address that history. Eventually, I think glass will be used almost like a found object, and its connection to architecture, technology and consumer culture will get more emphasis.

I also think glass artists will have to work with other mediums, lots of them. This happened decades ago in sculpture, and glass artists are way behind the curve. Still, better late than never. Glass artists will have to relinquish some of their loyalty to the medium, and let go of all that hard-won technique. This is an established trend in the artworld, and if glass artists want to get inside the temple, they will have to play by the rules.

(48. ONSCREEN IMAGE: CLIFFORD RAINEY “ICON FENDUE (ROUGE)” 2007)

This sculpture by Clifford Rainey looks a little like the future of glass. I’m not sure what his point is – I guess he’s talking about the source of the Coke bottle in a woman’s form, and maybe the way the language of Classicism underlies a great deal of modern design. But still, in service of his concept, Rainey underplays his craftsmanship and he mixes glass freely with other materials.

It makes me a little sad to say all this, because ultimately I’m a fan of pure craft. I also respect skill and patience, and I don’t think the artworld does. What I hope for is a new generation of glass artists who have the skills, but are skeptical of displaying hotshot craftsmanship for no reason. I hope they use the seductive qualities of glass, but without pandering. I hope they look for the subjects of glass, and the subjects of craft, and concentrate on them. And I hope they make objects so compelling that all the good citizens of the artworld can’t take their eyes off them.

And you know what? It will happen.