

r o b b a r n a r d e s s a y s

CRAFTS IN A MUDDLE

1 2 3 4 5 6

Published in *New Art Examiner*, February 1987.

The recent opening of the American Craft Museum's new space across the street from the Museum of Modern Art in New York focused an unprecedented amount of attention on the craft world. The museum's opening and its inaugural exhibition, *Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical*, have been covered extensively by the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Time* magazine, to name only a few. NBC's *Today* show even had Willard Scott do his weather reports from the museum one morning – you know you have arrived in popular culture when that happens.

Craft Today was organized and curated by Paul Smith, the museum's director since 1963. Smith put together an exhibition of some 300 works by 286 craftspeople from 36 states working in what are commonly referred to as "craft media" – clay, fiber, glass, wood, and metal. *Craft Today* may well be the landmark exhibition that the American Craft Museum says it is, but not for the reasons the museum expects. It is certainly, however, the largest survey of contemporary craft since the 1969 *Objects/USA* exhibition at the National Collection of Fine Arts (presently the National Museum of American Art). Now that the dust has settled and the hype and PR have died down, we can start to look at this exhibition and assess its impact on the craft field. Most important, has it aided craft's struggle for commercial and critical acceptance from the more celebrated fine arts, and, if so, at what cost?

One of the biggest problems for those working in the craft genre who desire to be taken as serious artists (not fine artists, but artists within the context of craft rather than that of painting or sculpture) is how to convince those skeptical or ignorant power brokers in the fine arts establishment that a cup, a plate, or a piece of furniture can have content – that these objects can be "proper" vehicles for the conveyance of artistic expression without becoming non-functional caricatures of themselves. Part of the resistance on the part of the fine arts establishment to this idea is a by-product of crafts own cavalier attitude toward and ambivalence about its own identity, as well as crafts lack of critical rigor or a developed critical vocabulary. For these reasons, many in the fine arts find it difficult to believe that craft, like painting and sculpture, has its own rich language with a long and varied history.

Intelligent criticism of crafts depends to a great degree on how literate one is in crafts language. Function is one of the most important parts of crafts language and the aspect of craft that the fine arts object to the most. It is crafts ability to function that allows it to be perceived by all of our senses and on a variety of different levels. Function not only gives viewers access to the work, it allows them to become active participants in the aesthetic process itself. By varying its placement and its use, the user's perception of the object is continuously transformed. Function, therefore, is integral to the aesthetic experience of crafts. It does not limit crafts, but rather is what gives crafts the unlimited potential to express a vast range of philosophical and aesthetic concerns.

Function alone, of course, guarantees nothing; it is simply part of the language of craft that the intelligent and articulate craftsperson uses to create eloquent and poetic statements. It is unfortunate that the fine arts, as is the case with many groups whose own language has achieved primary status and

>>

r o b b a r n a r d e s s a y s

CRAFTS IN A MUDDLE

1 2 3 4 5 6

position in a society, appear unwilling and disinclined to learn another language and even at times believe that those who do not speak their language lack ambition or worse, intelligence. Listen to Neal Benezra, associate curator of twentieth-century painting and sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago, in his *New York Times* article on *Craft Today*, titled "But Is It Art?":

"Contemporary work in other materials has generally been less ambitious. Craftsmen working with glass regularly produce vessels, woodworkers generally create furniture, and metalworkers frequently fashion jewelry.

Beyond ceramics, the only material to consistently yield works of art rather than objects of function has been fiber...Similar to Voulkos, Price, Arneson, and Mason, Zeisler and Hicks have avoided the all-too-common pitfall of making functional objects, a decision that has broadened the imaginative horizons of each and that has been essential to their growth as artists."

By offhandedly dismissing function and labeling the making of vessels, furniture, and jewelry as unambitious, Benezra displays a chauvinistic and patronizing attitude that says: if you want recognition from us, you had better learn to speak our language. This is typical of the criticism one often hears from smug and sanctimonious members of the fine arts establishment, who seem to relish displaying their intellectual shallowness regarding the crafts. This attitude also reflects the fine arts' claim that the production of art is an activity that can occur only within their sanctioned domain.

Imagine, for a moment, as hard as it may be, that the situation was reversed; that the craft establishment held the pre-eminent position in our society and painting and sculpture were the "marginal" activities. Then we would see painters and sculptors attempting to curry favor with the craft establishment by producing paintings and sculptures that were functional and resembled one of the craft disciplines like pottery, jewelry, or furniture making. And in an attempt to legitimize their work they would ask well-known craft critics to jury prestigious exhibitions. We might overhear the jurors decrying painters' obsession with rectangles and squares made almost exclusively of canvas and sculptors' total disregard for function. In the *New York Times* we might even find a craft critic lamenting that as long as painters continue to make paintings and sculptors continue to make sculpture their work will remain merely objects that can only be looked at. And that if they want to broaden their imaginative horizons, they will have to avoid the all-too common pitfall of making work that is nothing more than a non-functional, self-indulgent display of an individual's personality.

There are many craftspeople – and members of the craft establishment – who have bought Benezra's bill of goods. They have rejected whole parts of craft's language – function, for example – because they do not fit into Modernism's view of what art is or can be. Their gain is a dubious one, their rejection of function akin to one cutting off one's nose to spite one's face.

Paul Smith seems to have adopted a strategy for gaining entree to the fine arts that comes from an old saying: if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and squawks like a duck, then it must be a duck. In

>>

r o b b a r n a r d e s s a y s

CRAFTS IN A MUDDLE

1 2 3 4 5 6

other words, if crafts can look like fine art, be shown like fine art, and talked about in fine art terms, then it will be seen as fine art. One of the difficulties with such a strategy, however, is that it invites the kind of rigorous criticism and intellectual accountability common in the fine arts but which the craft field has always shied away from. So how do you have your cake and eat it, too? – how do you achieve the prestige and financial benefits of the fine art world and avoid that world's rigorous critical scrutiny? Smith seems to believe that it can be done by insisting that there is a line between art and craft and then making sure he is the one who declares where that line is. It is a neat trick, one he has been performing for years. Craft for him, to paraphrase Andy Warhol, has literally been anything he can get away with. *Craft Today*, which is Smith's most ambitious attempt to date at promoting his reformist view of craft and establishing himself as one of the foremost arbiters of the definition of contemporary craft in America, pushes this philosophy to its extreme.

Smith divided the exhibition into four somewhat confusing and, on closer scrutiny, arbitrary categories: "The Object as Statement," "The Object Made for Use," "The Object as Vessel," and the "Object as Personal Adornment." The purpose of the categories, according to Smith, was to provide structure and to "clarify a confusing variety of activities and aid the viewer in understanding the vast range of contemporary craft." They did neither; in fact it was almost impossible while wandering around the exhibition to know at any given moment which category one was viewing (the exception was a small cul-de-sac devoted to "The Object as Personal Adornment" read jewelry – that was a physically distinct display). The confusion was the result not of the installation but rather of the way the lines between categories were parenthetically and arbitrarily, drawn. The categories seemed to serve no real purpose other than to contribute to the illusion of insight and scholarship that masquerades as a critical analysis of the various movements within the field.

The "Object as Statement" category presented, Smith says, works created "primarily for their aesthetic value." This is a euphemism for objects in which either reference to traditional craft forms has been rejected or function has been denied because it supposedly restricts freedom of expression. It is, in essence, Benezra's idea of craft as fine art. This category, which made up over one-third of the objects in the exhibition, comprised work by craftspeople who have, for a variety of reasons, abandoned the craft language for the Modernist language of the fine arts. Although they have rejected the language of craft, they have not rejected the field. In fact, the majority maintains an almost exclusive relationship with the craft field by occupying university teaching positions that have commonly been thought of as "craft" positions, by exhibiting only in craft galleries, and by relying on craft magazines for the publication of articles on their work. A few have found acceptance outside the craft field: Ken Price, Robert Arneson, Ron Nagle, and Michael Lucero have all been accepted by the fine arts establishment. They are represented by blue-chip galleries in New York and have exhibited in major museums across the country. But what were they doing in the American Craft Museum? We are asked to believe they were there because of their craft background and their use of a craft medium like clay, but what their inclusion was really about was the legitimization of this category and the reformist approach it represents.

There was interesting work in "The Object as Statement" – from both a fine art standpoint and a craft standpoint. In the former group, ceramic artist Stephen De Staebler, woodworker Howard Werner, and

>>

CRAFTS IN A MUDDLE

1 2 3 4 5 6

papermaker Winifred Lutz all use traditional craft mediums without leaning heavily on either overt technical virtuosity or craft forms for emphasis. Their work is understood in the fine art context and relies on the discourse within that field for its significance. This does not make their work avant-garde craft but simply fine art. Sheila Hicks' and Glenn Kaufman's textiles, on the other hand, need to be looked at in the context of craft. The impact of their work relies on one's knowledge of traditional techniques and use of materials as well as a knowledge of the historical references they employ. Their work is beautiful, but not decorative, and best reveals this beauty in private encounters in daily life rather than in a chance encounter in a brightly lit gallery in SoHo. Quite a bit of the work included in this category, unfortunately, seems to be nothing more than fine art trends in craft materials. The result produced something like the feeling one experiences while attending a baseball game in Japan: you find yourself in the uncomfortable position of always having to second-guess your perceptions about something you thought you were totally familiar with.

"The Object Made for Use" category was made up predominantly of furniture. This was a result of Smith's belief that there is a "growing interest in making unique items designed for specific functions," and he believes this renewed enthusiasm for the functional is particularly evident in furniture making. It is unfortunate that most of the craftspeople in this category merely use function as a nail on which to hang their egotistical, slavishly technique oriented and conceptually weak work on. Thomas Loeser's *Chest of Drawers* and Peter Shire's *Rod and Transit and Hourglass Teapot*, for example, offer no new insights into the aesthetic dilemma of either furniture or teapots. What they do offer is a self-indulgent form of individual expression that cannot be taken as substantive or serious in either the fine art or craft contexts. Living with either work would be like living with a loudmouth braggart that always insists you see things his way. Gary Griffin's *Cap Gun, Roses, and Middle America* succeeds where Loeser's and Shire's works fail. Griffin fills his gate (and it is a gate) with personal imagery that is neither sentimental nor overtly self-referential. Technique supports his ideas and brings them to fruition instead of becoming an end in itself. Function is the device he uses to lure the viewer into his world rather than an excuse to remain in the craft field.

Smith really stretched the boundaries of the "Use" category by including Glenn Simpson's *Number Two Shovel* (a shovel entirely conventional in appearance but made of sterling silver and 14-karat gold with a hickory handle) and J. Fred Woell's *Aero Setdown* and *All's Calm on the Western Front* (both are similar to commemorative spoons; the handle of the former is composed of aircraft wreckage with a human arm extending from it, while the latter's handle is a soldier's body in the prone firing position). These pieces, in both appearance and title, are so obviously conceptual in nature that one has to wonder again what kind of curatorial justification Smith could possibly put forward to warrant their placement in "The Object Made for Use," Smith even seems to anticipate such criticism by saying in the catalogue, "Inevitably, when some 300 works are sorted into categories, gray areas result." Unfortunately *Craft Today* left one begging for a little more black and white instead of the shadowy gray areas Smith produced.

"The Object as Vessel" and "The Object as Adornment" both shared many of the same problems of the two previous categories. In the "Object as Vessel," for instance, Smith included three large outdoor

>>

r o b b a r n a r d e s s a y s

CRAFTS IN A MUDDLE

1 2 3 4 5 6

ceramic sculptures by Arnold Zimmerman (each about nine feet in height) that only by the wildest stretch of the imagination could be thought of as vessels. Even if one were to apply the ceramic field's often used expression "the vessel as metaphor," these objects simply cannot be read as such. "The Object for Personal Adornment" is made up primarily of jewelry except for a few "kimono"-like garments that one sees people wearing only at craft museum openings. Much of the jewelry suffers from the same tendencies that occur in most of the furniture in "The Object Made for Use." The individual's personality and an obsession with technique had the tendency to overwhelm any glimmer of an idea: the result was jewelry that tried to look like miniature sculpture instead of jewelry that challenges wearers to consider themselves part of the aesthetic equation.

An obsession with craftsmanship and technique was common to much of the work in this show. Some years ago Donald Kuspit made a connection between this "obsession" and academia: "...[an obsession with technique is] academic compensation for the absence of vision that is a consequence of making all one's meaning self-evident – a necessity of teaching." In this light it is significant that 90% of the artists Smith chose are academically trained and that well over half of them hold some kind of teaching position in the university system.

Contemporary craft in America is at an important – even critical – stage of its development. Since the late '60s it has been a pubescent teenager totally preoccupied with and fixated on itself to the point of ignoring any historical or cultural definition of craft other than its own. It is now reaching the age of consensus and can expect to be held accountable for its actions and statements.

Craft Today demonstrates, if nothing else, that the challenge facing crafts is one of definition and clarification of its aims and language. Many in the crafts establishment scoff at this analysis. Their reasons inevitably center around the argument that any definition of craft will severely limit its creative prospects. Benezra's and Smith's view of craft certainly reflects this position. It is not just the philosophical arrogance and paternalism of this reformist view of craft that is so intolerable: what is more important is that it essentially cuts craft off from its language.

The reformist view implies that craft forms of the past are no longer relevant: that the craft language is archaic and no longer able to speak to the heart of the human condition or to provide any moral or aesthetic lessons. This, of course, is absurd and is refuted by anyone with moderate sensibilities who has experienced the beauty, diversity, and depth of expression of, say, Egyptian and Pre-Columbian jewelry, pottery from the Sung Dynasty of China, textiles from Indonesia and our own Shaker furniture. These works and others like them share the common visual language of craft that eloquently expressed the human condition long before Modernism's view of art ever came into being and, I expect, still will centuries from now when Modernism will be no more than a footnote in the history of art. In the meantime, contemporary craft, in its obsession with being accepted by the fine arts seems in danger of losing fluency in its own language.

Although contemporary craft has in the last 25 years become more technically sophisticated and refined and has gained popularity with a wider audience, its aims are still unclear. *Craft Today* does nothing to

>>

rob barnard essays

CRAFTS IN A MUDDLE

1 2 3 4 5 6

remedy this state of affairs, but instead highlights and emphasizes this deplorable fact. Rudolf Arnheim's words at an American Craft Council conference in 1961 are, regrettably, as true today as they were then.

“As we look around in the field of crafts we see an abundance of talent and skill. We notice striking, original shapes, ever new ways of using new techniques and materials, and occasionally, a delicate sense of order and proportion. If, nevertheless, the general state of affairs is not quite satisfactory, it is because of an uncertainty of aims.”

The question those in the craft field, who are committed to the craft language, have to ask of *Craft Today* is not Benezra's “But Is It Art?” but rather, is it craft?