The Evolution of the Crafts from Function to Pure Sculpture

Elaine Martin
THE EVOLUTION OF THE CRAFTS FROM FUNCTION TO PURE SCULPTURE

Submitted by: Elaine L. Martin
Candidate for Master of Fine Arts Degree
Rochester Institute of Technology
May 15, 1972
Advisors: Donald Bujnowski
Robert Heischman
Steven Thurston
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

### PART I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CRAFTS

#### Chapter

1. **DEFINING TERMS AND BEGINNINGS OF THE HISTORY OF WEAVING**
2. **INDUSTRIAL IMPROVEMENTS—REVOLUTION IN WORK OF CRAFTSMEN**
3. **THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION'S IMMEDIATE AND LONG RANGE EFFECTS ON MAN AND ON HIS CRAFTS**

### PART II. THE CRAFTS TODAY

4. **DISCUSSION OF MODERN CRAFTSMEN**
   - Wood
   - Ceramics
   - Metals
   - Glass
   - Textiles
5. **ACCEPTANCE OF WEAVING IN MAJOR ART EXHIBITS**
6. **MY PHILOSOPHY AND MY WORK**

### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
LIST OF PLATES

Plate                                      Page

I.  Furniture by Mike Nevelson             19
II. Ceramics by Peter Voulkos              21
III. Ceramics by Robert Arneson            23
IV.  Fig. 1.--James Melchert's "Leg Pot Series"......25
     Fig. 2.--James Melchert's "Game Series" ....
V.   Metal Sculptures by Brent Kington       27
VI.  Hanging by Dominic Di Mare              35
VII. "Winter White" by Claire Zeisler       36
VIII. Hanging by Walter Nottingham          37
IX.  "Basket with Handle" by Ed Rossbach    39
X.   Weaving by Magdalena Abakanowicz       40
XI.  Main thesis piece--Sculptural--Rug......46
XII. Fig. 1 & 2--Details of Rug             47
XIII. Fig. 1 & 2--Details of Rug            48
XIV. Fig. 1 & 2--Details of Rug             49

LIST OF SLIDES

Slide

1-13. Manipulations of Sides of Rug
14-17. Views of Purple Soft Sculpture
17-     Series of Soft Sculptures
An earth goddess in the shape of a gullied mound of earth. A deflated latex medicine ball with the face of a beady-eyed, sunburned delinquent. Gigantic hanging hanks of fiber dedicated to wifely perseverance.

A monstrous double-rooted carrot woven of red, orange, and magenta wool and feathers and entitled "Women." A sculptured desk, poised like a huge insect ready for attack. A splay-footed effigy cabinet with wooden entrails behind its crude doors.

A shaggy prayer rug for kneeling on the wall. A breastplate with hanging leaves of silver shaped like ax blades.

The bizarre, the misshapen, the caricature. The func part of function. The spectacular, the exciting, the chic. The useless. The experimental, the mistaken, the discarded. The found, the lost, the free, the pure, the multi. The involved.

This is a description of the Johnson collection of Contemporary Crafts, "Objects: U.S.A." Because it is a cross section of the crafts done in the U.S.A. in 1969, this is also a very apt description of some of the many directions being taken by craftsmen throughout the United States today. The catalog of the "Young American 1969" show in Albuquerque, New Mexico stated that:

"... the largest, most overall influence [on today's young craftsmen] is the fine arts." Certainly, a preponderance of the work in this exhibition showed a primary concern with aesthetic values in themselves, rather than aesthetic values as an outgrowth of utilitarian purpose.²

---


Nearly everything that has happened in the fine arts--pop, op, abstract expressionism, hard edge, funk, porno--is happening in the crafts today. The border line between the arts and crafts is, in fact, as precarious as that between madness and genius. The diversity explosion is, it is said, as characteristic of the mediums, techniques, and purposes of the crafts as it is of the twentieth-century life in general.3

What has brought the crafts to this point of development where art and craft have interjoined? What has caused the confusion about the relationship of art and craft which is reflected in much of these and other statements concerning the crafts today? And most importantly, what direction am I following in my own work as an "artist craftsman" who has a strong background in painting and who feels the need to explore three-dimensions in a concrete tactile and spacial manner through textiles? These were some of my questions in beginning work on this thesis.

In researching the history of crafts and fine arts in the United States, I have come to realize that these words "crafts" and "fine arts" have had various meanings and connotations from century to century. It is difficult to even find the point in time when "art" and "craft" became separated in the minds of the majority of people. I will not attempt to trace this split in ideas; I will concentrate on the fact that for many decades these words, "art" and "craft," have had different meanings for most people and the reasons that I feel they are once again

3Simmons, "Objects: U.S.A.-The Johnson Collection of Contemporary Crafts," 27.
becoming united.

These matters of 1) the direction of the crafts movement today, and of 2) the new directions individuals are taking within it, are becoming important to many craftsmen as they feel freer to explore areas of sculpture, pop, op, funk, etc., which were solely within the "Fine Arts" domain a few years ago. These questions are voiced by California handcraftsmen in a reflection on the California Design XI show concerning the craftsman's search for himself:

How he became artist, how he remained craftsman, how some of him moved into the wider berth of production; ....... where do we go from here?

Our work is at a crossroads; ....... One finds a current state of flux, to say the least, in the mood of California craft---out from Pop, into Pop, it's too straight, where is Funk, the conceptual enters and struggles to go, size and scale, miniature, minimal. Is it art, can it be?4

In discussing these questions, I will give a brief history of textiles, for the history parallels most of the other crafts, and shows what I feel are important steps leading to its position at the present time. I will then discuss some of the individual artists whom I feel are important innovators in each of the craft areas of wood, ceramics, metals, glass, and textiles.

---

PART I: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CRAFTS
CHAPTER I

Defining Terms and Beginnings of the History of Weaving.

Throughout this thesis, my major emphasis will be on the craft movements in the United States. It has been necessary in some instances to look at trends and ideas of American craftsmen in context with foreign artists exhibiting here and abroad, however, since many of the motivating ideas in the United States have had roots in some of the European craft movements such as the English-Arts and Crafts renaissance fostered by William Morris and the German craft movement starting the Staatliche Bauhaus.

I wish to define the terms "functional and nonfunctional" as used in this thesis because "functional" defined in a very broad sense as anything "capable of serving the purpose for which it was designed," can include all "fine art" (paintings, sculpture, etc.) as satisfying the psychological need of man for beauty and aesthetic enrichment. However, the more specific definition, as given by the Random House Dictionary, of "Functional as having or serving a utilitarian purpose constructed or made primarily as a direct fulfillment of a material need; capable of operation or functioning" serves to make the important distinction between the functional and nonfunctional crafts.

---

The "nonfunctional" crafts serve only the purpose of decoration or "fine art" today.

From the invention of weaving with primitive man first intertwining two vines, weaving has been a source of warmth, protection, and shelter for man—a necessity of life which has enabled him to survive in the varied environments in which he has lived.

Textiles have been used by different peoples as clothing, blankets, nets, bags, tents, baskets, strainers, thatched roofs, masks, scarecrows, hammocks, toys, and religious ceremonial ornaments. Rugs, almost the only domestic furniture in the Orient, were used as beds and prayer-rugs in temples. They were also used to decorate walls of tombs in Egypt, Christian cathedrals, Buddhist temples, and Mohammedan-mosques and minarets. The Turkomans, a people who were for the most part wandering shepherds, used rugs as their flooring, walls, doors, beds, chairs, and baggage. In the Middle Ages, people wove and hung large tapestries on their stone castle walls to provide some warmth and insulation during the cold winters. Throughout history all these uses of textiles were primarily functional and utilitarian. Even though the textiles were often quite beautifully decorated, beauty was still a secondary consideration.

---

CHAPTER II

Industrial Improvements—Revolution in Work of Craftsmen

Through the ages man's ingenuity worked to enlarge and speed up his methods of spinning, dyeing, printing, and weaving materials by inventing new and larger machinery, such as the cotton gin; wool-carding and sewing machines; gauze-weaving, automatic, jacquard, and power looms, to do the jobs once solely done by hand. He also succeeded in harnessing the power to run them in the place of manpower. With the Industrial Revolution of 1790 in England and later in the United States, man succeeded in removing the necessity of each individual's spinning, weaving, and dyeing his own personal goods.

When the power loom had come to be the predominant method of cloth production in the U.S., about 1840, all phases of the textile process had moved from the home to the mill, and most of all of the operations could be performed mechanically and to some degree automatically. Prior to this, hand-spinning could be deemed a necessary labor and could not really be looked on as a craft as we mean it today. Design of the yarn was not a major concern. Yarn was handspun because it had to be handspun.7

Where it was once impossible for individuals to afford machine-made material in place of weaving their

---

own for everyday use, the industrial age has brought us to the opposite pole where it is now actually impossible for handmade articles to compete with machine-made articles for everyday use. In terms of time alone it is impossible for modern man to make the vast number and variety of goods which he uses everyday.
CHAPTER III

The Industrial Revolution's Immediate and Long Range Effects On Man and On His Crafts

The mechanization of the various crafts, especially the textile industry, has had various effects on man and on his crafts from the second half of the nineteenth century up until the present time. Industrialization caused a decline in the crafts through the 1800's up until the 1930's with the only notable crusader for the crafts being Louis Comfort Tiffany. Because of the novelty and decreasing prices of machine-made goods, crafts were largely cast aside as undesirable and obsolete.

All of the hand spinning done in the earlier part of the twentieth century can be classed with that of the pre-Industrial Revolution only in that it was hand spinning. It was in no way completely and necessarily utilitarian.\(^8\)

There were many sources of textile products and people were not forced to spin. Hand spinning only continued in remote areas where tradition and cultural influences were strongest.\(^9\) Automation in the factories began to supercede hand labor.

\(^8\)Ibid.

\(^9\)Ibid.
This increase in communications led to a greater awareness of and desire for easily available and higher status "store bought" textile products by these remote hand spinners. The motivation to hand spin was drastically reduced. By the time of the Depression, and certainly by the beginning of World War II, hand spinning as it had been, all but disappeared. For all practical purposes, it was the end of hand spinning for serving one's own utilitarian needs. There was no longer any necessary reason for weaving "home spun."10

Machines could produce all materials that were formerly made by hand while at the same time doing it faster and more economically.

Moving into the Forties, we find a strong movement in crafts developing, especially in weaving. True, the majority of this craftwork, weaving in particular, was in occupational therapy, recreation, and other avocational areas. The many textile craftsmen—producing contemporary nonutilitarian works as we know them today were not yet into their own.11

However, within the last thirty years, the growing scarcity of handmade goods, the bombardment of the individual with mass-produced industrial products, and the disillusionment of many people with the values fostered by profit-oriented industry has generated a new intense interest in all the crafts—wood, metals, glass, ceramics, and textiles. Modern mass production, in evidence everywhere around us in the furniture, dishes, jewelry, clothing, toys, and utensils we use and even the pre-fabricated homes we live in, is threatening to robotize and destroy the individual identity of man by molding him into a conformity of life and possessions.

10Ibid., p. 23
11Ibid.
In rebellion against this conformity of society man is searching for uniqueness of being. This psychological need is shown by man's newly awakened appreciation for the crafts in their production of one or fifteen of a kind articles as opposed to the 10,000 of a kind which industry stamps out at fantastic rates of speed.

Craftsmen are hoping to realize themselves and their unique work rhythms through the act of creating unique objects, while a large mass of society is hoping to find uniqueness of being by owning unique possessions.

The editor of the leading crafts magazine, *Craft Horizons*, echoes the philosophy of William Morris, who was largely responsible for the English Craft Renaissance, when she discusses the American craft movement.

In a society and a value system dominated by impersonal corporate structure and depersonalized technological function, modern craftsmanship is an affirmation of hand skills as human value—of work by hand and with tools as essential human activity, basic to the human organism and the human spirit. By refusing to allow the machine to take the making of things out of the creative human orbit, modern craftsmanship has pinpointed the difference between submissive, uncommitted labor, serving the power of the machine with little interest or responsibility to the product (which itself is only the medium through which the ultimate objective—money—is reached), and independent, responsible, committed work to produce ethically viable objects. Modern craftsmanship identifies work with selfhood and the process of self-creation. The transformation of life into things and things into life is the concern of the craftsman.12

John Lahr makes this reflection on mechanization, "The machine was a mammoth excitement and paradox, offering freedom on one hand and slavery on the other." For at the same time that industrialization has threatened to destroy man's individuality, it has paradoxically served to liberate him from the needs of making functional objects for everyday purposes. It has thereby freed the craftsman to express his individual ideas, whether they are functional or nonfunctional. It has given him more time and even new materials such as metallic, plastic, and synthetic fibers with which to work.

In continuing her discussion of the craftsman versus the machine, Miss Slivka tells about the liberating power of the machine.

He [the craftsman] not only recognizes the liberating power of the machine, but also that modern craftsmanship would not have been possible without it. The craftsman welcomes the machine as a tool to work with, not for. The machine must serve him, not he it. The craftsman insists on being in control of the machine. He will not allow it to be in control of him—the condition of human mechanization.

The craftsman is the enemy of mechanical mindlessness of the controlling automation that renders peripheral or unnecessary imagination, poetry, love, tears, laughter—creative man creating nothing important, nothing necessary, nothing necessarily enduring.

---


In industry, man becomes an impersonal cog in the mechanized wheel; he can as easily be replaced as one of the mass of cogs which he installs on the assembly line everyday.

The individual craftsman is a symbol of independence to much of the youth today who are seeking selfhood and a personal morality in opposition to "an incredibly complex technological society that treats people like objects (mass produced, replaceable and disposable ... 'Nobody is indispensable ...'). ..."\(^{15}\)

We have been taught to believe there is a technological solution to every problem. Today, young people do not accept this as morally viable. The cry is for a new humanism and resistance to increasing mechanization of thought, of feeling, of work. The presence of the craftsman in this emerging new humanism is crucial.\(^{16}\)

The modern machine has caused man to experience an alienation from self. This experience is reflected in much of modern art's appeal to the tactile and auditory senses in combination with the visual sense, which in the past has been the most important sense necessary to appreciate the two-dimensional arts.

In 1970, New York's Museum of Contemporary Crafts set up an exhibit focused entirely on "sound." There were "sound decorations, sound designs, some are played, some are worn, and some are simply for contemplation. It is mainly a mixed media presentation of sound ..."\(^{17}\)

\(^{15}\)Ibid., 10-11.
\(^{16}\)Ibid., 11.
Why is a craft museum entering into a realm of the auditory sense which has been primarily concentrated in concert halls? "Paul Smith, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, says, his museum aims 'to broaden aesthetic and sensitive awareness of our environment.'"\(^{18}\) This show recognizes the fact that many artists are beginning to utilize and produce sound vibrations in their sculptures and mixed media work. This appeal to man's tactile and auditory senses and especially the combined play upon all of the senses in total environment statements now being created arises from man's rejection of his rational faculties of thought. It is a desperate effort to jolt himself into "feeling" some physical involvement with the world rather than logically analysing it in his brain. Man has been unable to understand the world through his rational thought; he wants to try to understand it through his senses.

The American "art-object" or craft movement was pioneered in the 1920's and 30's when Mrs. Vanderbilt Webb organized craft groups as a means of income for the Depression poor in Putnam County where she maintained a home. "An outgrowth of this involvement led to the opening of American House, thereby assuring craftsmen of at least one sympathetic retail outlet [for their products]."\(^{19}\) The magazine for the craftsmen, _Craft Horizons_, was founded in

---

\(^{18}\)Ibid.

1941; the American Craftsmen's Educational Council (later to drop "Education" was founded in 1943 "to establish contact between the isolated craftsmen across the country"; the Museum of Contemporary Crafts opened in New York in 1956; the Craftsmen's conference was held at Asilomar, California in 1957; and the World Craft Council is now being organized. All of these organizations have given voice to the American craft movement.

Another significant change occurred in the fifties: an important segment of the movement became university oriented when its most inventive artists turned to teaching. Ever increasing numbers of universities and colleges added 'craft courses' and 'design departments' to satisfy the demands of students.21

Two schools were established to educate students in the crafts. Cranbrook Academy of art in Michigan was designed by architect Eliel Saarinen in 192822 and the School for American Craftsmen was founded at Dartmouth, in 1945; later moved to Alfred, New York in 1948; and finally built its permanent campus at Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York in 1968. Both of these schools had renowned artists on their faculties and helped to encourage excellence in the craft areas.

These two major schools in conjunction with other universities across the country "proved to be primarily

20Ibid.
21Ibid., 13.
responsible for bringing public attention to the new object artist. As campus art departments grew in importance, college museums opened and the object was shown along with painting and sculpture. Schools began to get grants to encourage education in the crafts. In the university atmosphere, crafts began to be more closely related to the architecture, sculpture, and painting, and these areas began to overlap and impinge upon each other. This movement of the crafts into schools and universities was a very important factor in reuniting "crafts" and "fine arts" in modern thought.

I have chosen to discuss, briefly, the history of the craft movement because I feel that this background is necessary to understanding some of the modern trends in the crafts today. It explains why sculptural possibilities are being explored in all of the major craft media whether the craftsmen are working in functional or nonfunctional areas and also why the crafts are becoming united with "fine arts" as media of personal expression.

---

23 Nordness, Objects: U.S.A., 14
PART II: THE CRAFTS TODAY
CHAPTER IV

Discussion of Modern Craftsmen

A discussion of some of the modern craftsmen will show that:

The craftsman works within a wide range of choices that run the gamut from art to utility. They may contain mystery, message, challenge, comedy, grief, vision, anger, or just attention to the ordinary, investing the necessary with a gesture of grace, like the Zen tea master, regarding the small scope.\textsuperscript{24}

The craftsmen, freed by the machine, from utilitarian production; began to use his skills to broaden his range of expression and greatly diminished the distinction between artist and craftsmen.\textsuperscript{25} The craftsman can create any shape or form regardless of its structural necessity or its functional importance. In discussing the different craft areas of wood, ceramics, metals, glass, and textiles, I will concentrate on some of the artists who were the first to break out of the confines of strictly utilitarian work and to explore sculptural or nonfunctional areas.

Wood

Wharton Esherick, the undisputed dean of American

\textsuperscript{24}Slivka, "Affirmation--The American Craftsman 1971," 11.
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 10.
woodworkers, has played a decisive role in the reestablishment of the medium in contemporary art.

His aim is to instill the utilitarian function of furniture with the same characteristics that govern sculpture—notably line, mass, and movement, and the juxtaposition of planes to create effects of light and shadow.26

Coming from a painting background, he became involved with wood as a medium. He broke away from the industrial or common functional concept of chairs, tables, desks, cabinets etc., to explore the sculptural integration of furniture as total environment. His home is an example of his ideas put into practice. Wendell Castle discussed his debt to Esherick at the time of Esherick's death.

It had never occurred to me that furniture could be anything so personal or so powerful as sculpture. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Esherick taught me that the making of furniture could be a form of sculpture; Esherick caused me to come to appreciate inherent true characteristics in the utilization of wood; and finally, he demonstrated the importance of the entire sculptural environment.27

Wendell Castle's "own laminated furniture reflects a surrender of mere utilitarian function to a primarily, aesthetic one."28

Mike Nevelson's series of furniture sculptures are also very personal interpretations of traditional


furniture. He believes that throughout history man has created furniture to fulfill his psychological as well as his functional needs. His chests of drawers, clocks, and chairs become figurative sculptures which almost literally represent "grandfather clocks" or chairs with anthropomorphic feet, legs, and faces.

The juxtaposition of form and function is an important concern to Nevelson. "To me, a fine piece of furniture can have all the grandeur, all the majesty, all the visual impact, all the intellectual excitement, all the emotional involvement, all the vibrating nervous energy of a great figurative sculpture. It shakes with a life of its own; it carries the heartbeat of the one who conceived it. Whether sculpture, like architecture, is or is not functional is secondary, but it gives me joy to feel form can have the added dimension of true functionalism.

Although most of these craftsmen's pieces function as furniture, they, like many other craftsmen in wood today are expanding the traditional concepts of wood to create an exciting new concept of furniture as very personal sculptural statements.

---

29 See Plate I, page 19.

PLATE I

Furniture by Mike Nevelson
Ceramics

Peter Voulkos' experiments\textsuperscript{31} with his students in California between 1954 and 1958 caused a revolution to take place in contemporary American ceramics.

At that time the most universal clay aesthetic in the U.S. held that a good pot was a useful object, a vessel, and should express both the nature of the material from which it was made and the method by which it was formed.\textsuperscript{32}

Departing from the traditional concepts of utility, symmetry, and equilibrium that had governed the history of the ceramic art for centuries, Voulkos energized a generation of creative ceramists into breaking pottery out of its traditional form.\textsuperscript{33}

Voulkos was greatly influenced by Picasso's ceramics, Japanese pottery, the Abstract Expressionist, and the American "action" school of art, especially the work of Franz Kline. Because of these influences, Voulkos pushed his medium in the direction of modern painting and sculpture. He painted on stoneware and bisqueware with very brightly colored glazes, which had at this time only been used by little old ladies, and used them in a new way never seen before.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31}See Plate II, page 21.

\textsuperscript{32}Helen Giambruni, "Abstract Expressionist Ceramics," Craft Horizons, XXVI, No. 6 (1966), 17.

\textsuperscript{33}Nordness, Objects: U.S.A., 64.

\textsuperscript{34}Paul Soldner, "Ceramics-West Coast," Craft Horizons, XXVI, No. 3 (1966), 28.
PLATE II

Ceramics by Peter Voulkos
Carring this [the influence of painting on ceramics] even further, Pop, Op, and Hard-Edge painting have had their influence on ceramics of the last two or three years. A lot of younger potters are trying to use them in their work by going back to the White low-fire bodies, using metallic colors, Platinums, luster glazes, etc.\(^3\)

Because of his experimentation in the ceramic medium, Voulkos became "mentor to a group of young West Coast artists who later became identified with the Funk aesthetic, such as Robert Arneson\(^6\) and Joe Pugliese."\(^7\) Voulkos discusses the reasons for the increase in popularity of pottery, and I feel that these are the same reasons that the crafts as a whole are appealing to people throughout the United States.

They clarify a person's position as an aware individual, as one who appreciates owning—or making—works of art in any form. And in California, where so many people live in vast developments of look-alike houses, there is a tremendous appetite for individuality, especially among the post-war generation.\(^8\)

Other craftsmen following Voulkos' lead are Robert Arneson and James Melchert. Arneson, leader in working with "polychrome, low-fire clay, . . . has transformed the familiar objects of modern life into vehicles of brash and virulent social commentary."\(^9\)

---

\(^3\)Ibid.

\(^6\)See PLATE III, page 23.

\(^7\)Nordness, Objects: U.S.A., 96.

\(^8\)Conrad Brown, "Peter Voulkos," Craft Horizons, XVI, No. 5.

PLATE III

Ceramics by Robert Arneson
James Melchert, who works with clay in a very sculptural way, says of his "Leg Pot Series":\textsuperscript{40}

I was impatient with the conventions that seemed to tyrannize potters, the vertical, bilaterally symmetrical structure of a vessel and the unquestioning acceptance of a single material.\textsuperscript{41}

His series of games\textsuperscript{42} in which everyday objects are placed against a gameboard background are intended to "sensitize the viewer's awareness of his relationship to things with which he lives and interacts!"\textsuperscript{43}

In ceramics, these artists, along with many others, have broken with purely functional ideas of pottery to explore and create new techniques and forms in order to make personal statements of their own philosophies.

Metals

Sculpture has had a very strong influence on much of the modern jewelry and metal work. In the past "jewelry responded to the frequent changes of fashion and, for the most part, imitated eighteenth century pyrotechnics."\textsuperscript{44} In the 1930's Margaret DePatta rebelled against the unimaginative interpretations of conventional jewels

\textsuperscript{40}See PLATE IV, Fig. 1, Page 25.

\textsuperscript{41}Nordness, Objects: U.S.A., 121.

\textsuperscript{42}See PLATE IV, Fig. 2, Page 25.

\textsuperscript{43}Nordness, Objects: U.S.A., 120.

\textsuperscript{44}Hal Halverstadt, "American Jewelry 1963," Craft Horizons, XXIII, No. 2 (1963), 50.
Fig. 1.--James Melchert's "Leg Pot Series"

Fig. 2.--James Melchert's "Games Series"
and was beginning to experiment with modern designs. "45 Bauhaus design concepts were spread in the United States, and metals are now coming into their own as an important medium.

Stanley Lechtzin was one of the first artists to utilize a modern technique of industry, electroforming, to produce creative jewelry.

Approximately six years ago, I reached the point in my work where the structures I wished to create were no longer possible within the realm of traditional tools and techniques. I therefore began to explore the possibilities presented by our contemporary industrial technology. I found it possible, using the electroforming process, to develop light objects which normally would have been unwearable due to their weight. Combinations of materials which had been difficult or impossible to achieve were made feasible.46

Lechtzin used industrial technology to create unique sculptural forms in metals which were never possible until now.

Brent Kington also allows his imagination full rein in working in metals. He creates fantasy machines and other miniature objects with little interest in their function except as adult toys and sculptures.47

Ron Pearson discussed the fact that many servicemen coming back in 1947 "had been disillusioned with a mass type of society. They wanted to lead a more meaningful

45 Ibid.
47 See PLATE V, page 27.
PLATE V

Metal Sculptures by Brent Kington
life, and the craft field offered some potential of this."48 Pearson has worked in precious metals with a feel for the sculptural as well as functional aspect of jewelry. Most recently he has been working with "iron in combination with copper, silver, and gold,"49 to produce large scale sculptural statements of traditionally functional objects such as candelabras and hanging and standing lights. He says, "My interest in the past year has been drifting towards a freer approach to design and to the use of nonprecious metals..."50

These craftsmen working in metal are creating innovative functional and nonfunctional pieces. They are not only utilizing age-old methods of working with metals and using them in new ways, but are also taking industrial techniques and applying them to their own work.

Glass

The modern glass movement is unique among the other craft movements in the United States. Although glass had been made originally as utilitarian products, in individual craftsmen's shops during the Middle Ages, the comparable intensity in Modern Europe."52 Working with


49 Nordness, Objects: U.S.A., 182.

Industrial Revolution removed the production of glassware from the individual craftsmen's shop to factories where the operations, which had once been performed by one or two craftsmen, were fragmentized to be performed by assembly line teams of men. This industrialization of glass was so widespread in American that it eventually built up an "aura of impossibility" for the individual craftsman to produce a piece of glass alone.

Harvey Littleton, coming from an industrial background as the son of a physicist who developed glass products for Corning in New York, rediscovered the free glass blowing techniques of the lone master glassblower and revived glass as a new art medium in the United States. Harvy Littleton and Dominick Labino, two men from industrial backgrounds were able to revive an ancient art form which had almost been lost through industrialization. They utilized modern glass technology in combination with older techniques to give a greater freedom of expression to the artists and to liberate glass from a total functionalism.

"Glassblowing as a field for the individual artist-craftsman (as opposed to the team operation common to factory production) is totally unprecedented in the American craft scene; nor has there been activity of comparable intensity in modern Europe." Working with


Dominick Labino at the first glass workshop at the Toledo Museum of Art in 1962, Littleton led the renaissance of creative free-form glass in the United States.

Utilizing the technical information available through the laboratories of industrial production ... Littleton was able to dedicate himself immediately to the principle of direct and total involvement with the material in order to elevate its utilization beyond the established functional and decorative boundaries.  

Littleton, influenced by Abstract Expressionism, feels that modern glass requires an uninhibited approach to break away from the uniformity of most industrial production.  

When he first began blowing glass, Littleton stayed within the confines of classic vessel forms; later, however, at the suggestion of Peter Voulkos, he began to break away from tradition to explore the range of form and expression suggested by the medium's qualities of immediacy, fluent plasticity, and response to light. ... And as has been the case with other crafts (first with ceramics under Voulkos' influence, and later with weaving), the most advanced work in glass-blowing, in breaking with traditional forms and the concern for utility, has tended more and more toward sculpture.  

Dominick Labino, another leading glass craftsman who led in its revival; has been a leading innovator in the field. He developed new glass composition, processes, and even furnace design. His knowledge and leadership were important in re-establishing blown glass as an art form.

53 Nordness, Objects: U.S.A., 144  
54 Smith, "Offhand Glass Blowing" Craft Horizons, XXIV, No. 1 (1964), 221.  
55 Giambruni, National Invitation Glass Exhibition, 36-38.
Textiles

I feel that there are three new trends emerging in modern textiles beside the functional work which has been important throughout its history. These trends are shown in:

1. The nonfunctional wall hangings and sculptures which experiment with "the nature of space." Old techniques such as knotting, wrapping, and braiding from Peru and other ancient civilizations are being used to produce sculptural experiments in texture, color and form.

2. The mixed media statements, which freely combine modern synthetic materials along with the traditional cotton, woolen, and linen fibers. Craftsmen try to encourage a spontaneity of expression and experimentation in their work. Lili Blumenau says, "almost anything is valid as long as it is a personal expression of the individual artist-craftsman." 56

3. The environmental statements which try to "get a continuity of design and materials working on three planes at the same time and to get the viewer to be an active participant, so that he is not just observing surface textures and graphics from the outside, but moving through them and experiencing them." 57


These statements try to involve all five of man's senses in an environment of time, motion and space.

The following craftsmen have pioneered in the modern textile movement, Dorothy Liebes, Anni Albers, and Lenore Tawney.

Dorothy Liebes, although she is primarily an industrial designer, "has had a tremendous influence on the growing use of synthetic fibers and unexpected color combination."58 Because of her innovative ideas, she has done a great deal to upgrade the textile production of industry toward crafted and designed textiles.

Anni Albers, "a dominant presence among weavers for almost four decades dating back to her student work at the Bauhaus,"59 has mastered both the machine for textile production and the hand loom.

In her hand-loom work she tends to think of textiles architecturally. She has done a great deal of experimentation with multi-layered weavings. Discussing creative weaving, she says,

Free experimentation here can result in the fulfillment of an inner urge to give permanence to ideas. But most important to one's own growth is to see oneself leave the safe ground of accepted conventions and to fine oneself alone and self-dependent.60

---

59 Ibid. 279.
Lenore Tawney has made the most imaginative departure from traditional techniques. She "is credited with being one of the first weavers—if not the first—to create three-dimensional hangings, thereby freeing the medium forever from functional uses or wall placements."61 Starting out as a sculptor, Tawney has brought weaving into its own as a medium with great sculptural potentialities which until now have not been explored. Katherine Westphal says, "Lenore Tawney's things are woven sculpture."62 Tawney has helped to erase the line between craft and art.

The picture of craftsmen in textiles today is much changed from what it was, say, twenty-five or even ten years ago. We see a trend away from utilitarian limitations. We see freedom of the craftsmen in textiles to experiment, and we see new values coming about.63

Many younger weavers are beginning to explore the new sculptural, mixed media, and environmental areas of weaving.

Dominic Di Mare is solely interested in personal expression in his multi-layered, sculptural textiles. "Some of his forms are three-dimensional and are allowed to move to establish changing relationships with the viewer, while others set up special settings with specific emotional impacts."64 He has also incorporated

64Nordness, Objects: U.S.A., 333.
feathers and other foreign objects into his weavings by using wrapping techniques. His weavings create a tension between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional planes and are some of the most exciting works being done today.

"Claire Zeisler uses off-loom techniques because she finds these less restrictive than loom techniques." Her free-standing pieces have strength because of their simple techniques and form. Her "Winter White" weaving takes on a life of its own and creates its own surrounding atmosphere.

Walter G. Nottingham utilizes weaving, crochet, and macrame in his wall hangings. He stuffs and manipulates multiple layers to make the "unseen visible." He says, "Fabric can and often does have within its aura a pent-up energy, an intense life of its own."

Sheila Hicks recreates in modern terms older themes of textiles such as her "Prayer Rug Series."

"Many of her inspirations can be traced to ancient Andean sources—twining, looping, wrapping, knotting, braiding (all non-loom techniques.) She uses these ancient techniques to produce sculptural forms which

---

65See PLATE VI, page 35.
67See PLATE VII, page 36.
68See PLATE VIII, page 37.
69Nordness, Objects: U.S.A., 335.
70Ibid.
Hanging by Dominic DiMare
"Winter White" by Claire Zeisler
Hanging by Walter Nottingham
are satirical comments on modern life. She "expands our appreciation of what yarn is and what it can do in changing spacial juxtapositions and environments."

Ed Rossback is also interested in Peruvian and other old weaving techniques. He has woven raffia over wire frames\(^1\)\(^2\) to make a personal exploration of conventional weaving and stuffed synthetic materials, such as plastic tubes, with braided materials and woven with these plastic tubes as with yarn.

Recently he has begun to think about the possibility of a 'textile environment' and of having, for example, a collection of pure, woven textiles—cotton, linen, etc., 'moving past each other in such a way as to produce sounds. "I want to amplify these sounds, put them on tapes, chop up the tapes, and then create musical compositions from the sounds and use them in conjunction with textile environments. You could build your whole world of textiles... There is no telling what textile environments would be like."\(^3\)

This idea, like the other new trends in textiles, is being explored by craftsmen in the United States and in other countries.

Although Magdalena Abakanowicz is not an American weaver, she is a good example of a craftsman working with large sculptural textiles to make a total environment.\(^4\)

\(^{1}\)Ibid.
\(^{2}\)See PLATE IX, page 39.
\(^{3}\)Nordness, Objects: U.S.A., 326.
\(^{4}\)See PLATE X, page 40.
"Basket With Handle" by Ed Rossbach
Weaving by Magdalena Abakanowicz
I have chosen to discuss the philosophies and ideas of these particular artists because most of them also express to varying degrees my own philosophy about art and craft.

The need for organization in writing this thesis paper has forced me to categorize these artist-craftsmen according to their use of materials and way of working, but actually the new movements in the crafts are breaking down these past divisions. It is precisely this breaking down of the rigid classifications of "crafts" and "fine art" that is the essence of the new movement.

There are many hangings that are more sculpture than hangings, and some paintings that are certainly crossing the threshold into the world of stitches—eg. Jean Hans Arp's painting—"Duncer". . . . 75

We ask, "Is it a painting, a wall hanging, or a sculpture?" 76 But why must we categorize it? What is important is "that the artist has stimulated our minds with a presentation of form and texture which is unique to our visual experience." 77 The artist's "work should honestly reflect his own philosophies and ideas," 78 regardless of the medium in which he is working. An article in "Time Magazine" on the

76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 147.
Whitney Museum of American Arts Show "The Avant-Garde: Subtle, Cerebral, Elusive" explained this idea. "Art is no longer stratified by 'fine' but is the expression of concepts, with techniques, materials, and processes subordinate."79

---

79 Virginia Hoffmann, "When Will Weaving be an Art Form?", *Craft Horizons*, XXX, No. 4 (1970), 19.
CHAPTER V

Acceptance of Weaving in Major Art Exhibits

The new sculptural and nonfunction trends in the crafts, especially weaving, are changing the attitudes and contents of many major museum exhibits and shows. The second Smithsonian Institute show in 1969 is different from the first exhibit in 1959 in two main respects:

First, it is about crafts, not about crafts, sculpture, and painting. . . . And second, as a whole, the crafts have become more three-dimensional. . . . . . . . . . . . . This greater sense of depth within a material and of the nature of the space within its setting can also be seen in weaving. Peter Collingwood and Tadek Beutlich, in particular, have been developing new techniques for their looms, while at the same time, introducing new materials into fabrics and wall hangings. 80

The International Tapestry Biennale in Lausanne is the world's largest exhibit of art weaving. It shows current work of craftsmen in the United States and throughout the world. There have been four exhibits since its founding in 1961 and "although both CITAM (Centre International de la Tapisserie Ancienne at Moderne) and Lausanne Biennale were founded by Jean Lurcat in the Aubuson decorative arts

tradition, the exhibitions have perceptibly altered each two years, accepting more and more structural and sculptural works of the avant-garde. . . . "81

Discussing modern weaving, Jack Lenor Larson says:

The first half of 1969 is a giant step up for weavers and--by osmosis--for craftsmen in general. Perspectief in Textile at Amsterdam's prestigious Stedelijk Museum. . . is itself a major exhibition, . . . That New York's Museum of Modern Art has almost simultaneously opened "Wall Hangings," and London's Victoria and Albert has launched a rare one-man show for weaver Peter Collingwood all add up.

When in 1965 and 1967 Eastern block Countries sent hangings to compete with painting and sculpture at the Sao Paulo Biennale, the works found acceptance as well as critical and editorial acclaim, Magdelena Abakanowicz of Poland won the gold medal in 1965, not as a weaver but as an artist. In the light of all this it is not surprising that estimable American galleries are adding weavers to their artist's stables. . . . 82

The Craftsman is beginning to gain the recognition and acceptance in major exhibits for which he has been striving.

---


CHAPTER VI

My Philosophy And Work

I have researched the history of the crafts and their modern directions in order to better understand my own personal direction as an artist-craftsman. In thinking about my philosophy in terms of my work, I realize that I am very much a product of growing up at this time in history. The directions which attract me in textiles, regardless of my attempts in other areas, all resolve around the uniqueness of the object which I am creating. Even in my first learning experiences in textiles, doing basic weaves and techniques, I have always attempted to make an unusual piece. I can only approach my work from the standpoint of creating a unique piece, which would be almost impossible to duplicate. This is the only idea which completely excites me and retains my attention. I can see no point in my doing anything that could be done as well or better by a machine. I feel this idea is a result of my recognition of and conditioning to modern mechanization and times which I have discussed earlier as influencing the new art movements.

The main piece of my thesis83 is a synthesis of

83See Plates XI-XVII-XVIII-XIX, pages 46,47,48,49.
PLATE XII

Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.
PLATE XIII

Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.
functional piece, a rug, and a unique sculptural form which appealed to both my tactile and visual senses. This piece involved a complex growth problem in which I attempted to have three progressions of colors (yellows, greens, and purples) working with intermeshing progressions of size and shape in the side areas. I wanted to use the tapestry technique, not merely to duplicate a painting, but to create a statement which because of its integration of form, color and texture, could not have been done as satisfactorily in any other technique or medium.

I did extensive work in natural dyeing because I was intrigued by the infinite range of colors which these dyes could produce. The subtle colors of natural dyes are very difficult to duplicate and have not been reproduced successfully in industrial dyes. Color has a very strong effect upon me; therefore, it is important to find a satisfying combination of colors. I was able to achieve exciting color through repeated experimentation with natural dyes used in combination with some industrially dyed yarns. I felt an influence of pointillism in my wish to create new colors by blending and combining different colors and textures to achieve a feeling of expansion and contraction in the

84The oldest form of dying using plants, bark, and insects which contain a coloring matter that imparts a particular hue to cloth. It has been replaced in common usage by synthetic dyes.
side areas. In this main piece of my thesis, I tried to integrate combinations of colors, forms, and textures into a unique functional and sculptural statement.

My second thesis piece, the purple soft sculpture, was the outgrowth of manipulations of the side areas of the rug before it was completed.\(^8^5\) In this piece, I was working with another growth progression where one form grows into and bursts forth from another form. I was interested in following separate yarns as they unite with others to form larger lines and eventually shapes. I am working in a monochromatic range of color which moves in slight gradations around the form from the darkest violet to a lighter purple. This second purely sculptural piece was a direct outgrowth of ideas which came to me as I worked on my sculptural rug.\(^8^6\)

My third thesis piece, a series of soft sculptures,\(^8^7\) was also the result of my analysis of the interaction of color and shape in my rug. Reducing my complex ideas down to their essence, I realized that the interaction of colors and forms could be explored by combining three simple shapes. The undulating lines and shapes in the rug became combinations of pure colored triangular shapes—a dark purple line or triangle surrounded by two bright yellow lines or triangles and

\(^8^5\)See Slides No.
\(^8^6\)See Slides No.
\(^8^7\)See Slides No.
the opposite of a yellow triangle surrounded by two purple triangles. I wanted to work with spacial illusions and the resulting vibrations of edge. Using these three triangular shapes, I experimented with naturally dyed colors in the same way as Josef Albers did in the painting of his squares. I purposely chose a simple design to reduce the number of variables so that I could concentrate on the interaction of pure colors. I overcame many of the problems of reproducing natural dyes and did timed dyeings to create the illusion of space that I was seeking. This element of optical illusion, such as is evident in Victor Vasarely's work, was also interesting to me in terms of my uniting dyed shapes in different formations to give the illusion of changing spacial planes.

My work in these thesis pieces shows a natural evolution from functional to nonfunctional concepts which is similar to the directions being taken by other craftsmen in the United States today. In searching the history of and directions in the modern-crafts movement, I have recognized some of the same ideas motivating my own work. Today, when the differences between "art" and "craft" are diminishing and causing some confusion as to the individual craftsman's place within them, I feel that it is important for me to realize and to clearly express my philosophy in my own work.
Selected Bibliography


