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THE AMBIGUITY OF MODERN CRAFT

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It is rather ironic that in the “Year of Crafts” there is still a question about exactly what crafts is. What is it trying to say, who is it speaking to, what language is it speaking and what is its intent? This question of what crafts is exactly, seems harder, not easier to answer with every new survey exhibition of modern crafts. Indeed, from observing the content of these exhibitions and examining the field’s publications, one could not be blamed for arriving at the conclusion that this highly ambiguous picture of modern crafts is something that is carefully cultivated.

There are two predominant factions in modern crafts, each reflecting distinct (if immature) philosophical positions. One group is composed of so called “traditional” craftspeople that are engaged in the repetitive creation of useful crafts. These crafts people, more often than not, market their work at crafts fairs and sell it wholesale to crafts shops and measure their success, more or less, by their sales. The other group (who abhors the title craftsperson) is comprised of university instructors. They were trained in the university system and took jobs there immediately after graduate school. Unlike their colleagues in painting and sculpture, however, who evaluate each other in terms of what and where they exhibit, these academic craftspeople have tended to measure each other in terms of where they teach. While they do exhibit, their exhibitions have almost always been reciprocal affairs in each other’s university galleries. Because they are subsidized by university salaries, materials and studio space, they have been not only sheltered from the kind of critical scrutiny most painters and sculptors have to submit to, but also have been free from the need to interact with the messy and demanding marketplace which traditional craftspeople have been forced to depend on. These two groups do, to some degree, overlap and have maintained, over the years, an uneasy relationship – attending their own media specific conferences, competing in the same category for NEA Fellowships and sharing the same publications. But there is a certain amount of antipathy between them. The academic craftspeople generally view traditional craftspeople as romantics who are more involved in lifestyle issues than artistic issues. Traditional craftspeople, on the other hand, see academic craftspeople, for the most part, as dilettantes who live in the proverbial ivory tower.

Academic craftspeople, however, have been the main force behind modern crafts’ rush for cultural and economic parity with painting and sculpture. The strategy in their campaign to gain fine arts recognition seems to center around two maxims. First, an object cannot be useful because they believe that use is what the fine arts disapproves of most about the crafts. An object, however, can look like (the parlance is “refer”) a teapot as long as it is not functional. Second, objects should reflect fine arts trends but employ only recognizable crafts techniques and materials. Traditional crafts, which have focused on use and have seen the home, not a museum, as its final destination, are viewed by academic crafts as a stumbling block to this pursuit, and, consequently, have been portrayed as a vehicle unfit for the expression of serious artistic thought. While there are a few traditional craftspeople left in academia, most have been exorcised and traditional crafts has been forced to secure patronage from crafts fairs and crafts shops. The result is that more and more traditional crafts have started looking like shallow, commercial boutique ware. Meanwhile, academic crafts, which has held sway over modern crafts edu-

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cational institutions, publications, professional associations and museums, has been under no pressure to explain its claim that, while modern crafts is just like painting and sculpture, it is somehow special and cannot be judged by the same criteria as painting and sculpture.

In the past 10 years, though, commercial galleries have emerged as a possible alternative to both the crafts fair/crafts shop venue and the university gallery. These galleries exhibit craft objects in the same manner fine arts galleries show painting and sculpture, and although the work they exhibit (primarily academic crafts) does not demand fine arts prices, it does sell. This new commercial venue has sparked the need for so-called “critical” analysis and has spawned new publications filled with glossy advertisements aimed at fine arts collectors who have grown weary of the bombast and high prices of post-modern painting and sculpture. Modern crafts, by adopting a strategy most marginal elements in culture resort to – that is to imitate the group from whom they seek approval – seems close to realizing its goal.

Artists, critics, curators and gallery owners in the fine arts world, however, are still not very enthusiastic about modern crafts. When confronted with this new fine arts/crafts hybrid, they inevitably complain that modern crafts seems to be nothing more than elaborate and complicated technique masquerading as artistic concept. To most of them the crafts world looks like a small, self-satisfied club, unconcerned with issues outside its own world. There is much truth to this perception. Modern crafts has always tried to have their cake and eat it too. Their continued insistence that crafts is art but that it is special and cannot be judged by fine art standards has not been supported by the kind of intellectual and aesthetic criteria that would create a context in which the unique aspects of crafts can be read and understood. This is something modern crafts seems reluctant to explore. For it would not only entail explaining why they have abandoned crafts historical language, but also mean formulating a new history and language for crafts that would be believable and hold up to critical scrutiny.

Modern crafts’ present position in American culture is not unlike the painters and sculptor’s predicament in the 1930s. Dore Ashton in her book *The New York School* noted that until World War II, for example, “...most wealthy patrons regarded the painter and sculptor as embellishments of culture, basically non-essential.” In an effort to establish a viable position in culture for their work, painters and sculptors, of what became known as the New York School, aggressively pursued an intellectual dialogue with not only writers and composers, who were the predominant artists of their time, but also philosophers, critics, psychiatrists and scientists. Ashton remarks that the purpose of the legendary Club was “...to confirm their widening audience among the educated strata of the society and to establish the visual artist as a member of the intelligentsia on equal footing with writers and composers. No amount of nostalgic disclaiming can disguise the interest the visual artists displayed in attracting other intellectuals to their bailiwick, and putting them in their place, so to speak.”¹

Modern crafts, on the other hand, has never fostered a climate sympathetic to the kind of intellectual discourse where the crafts’ possible role and relevance in modern culture might be analyzed and debated. It has, instead, chosen to explain its ineffectual position in culture by falling back, rather passively,

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on the argument that Western culture for the last 200 or so years has devalued the handwork, usefulness and domestic nature of crafts in favor of the heroic and purely visual appeal of painting and sculpture. There is no question that this prejudice exists, but at a time when the validity of the tenets of modernist and post-modernist painting and sculpture are being questioned, the crafts should be mounting cogent arguments that not only challenge the cultural supremacy of the fine arts, but also demonstrate the unique role crafts can play in addressing the separation of the art experience from our everyday lives. Modern crafts appears reluctant, however, to risk the benefits, comfort and relative safety of the insular world it has created for itself by openly challenging the fine arts cultural supremacy and claiming for the crafts the kind of philosophical and moral imperative to which painting and sculpture have laid claim. Until it does, though, modern crafts will continue to be a marginal activity with negligible influence on our culture.

References:

1. Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*, Viking Press, 1973, p.198.