

## TRADITION AND THE MODERN CRAFTS ESTABLISHMENT

1 2 3

Published in *The Studio Potter*, 18(2), June 1990.

Modern crafts' institutions, its museums, funding agencies, publications, educational institutions, and professional organizations have labeled the making of traditional craft objects – anything useful or recognizable in an historical sense as craft – as unimaginative, irrelevant, and passé. They have advanced this view of traditional craft, not only by excluding it from the field's survey exhibitions like *The Eloquent Object and Poetry of the Physical*, but also by discouraging, in our universities, its practice by undergraduates and by rejecting it as an entirely merit less subject for postgraduate study.

The proponents of so-called modern craft have sought to invalidate the historical definition of crafts' language and replace it with an artificial version based on American modernist painting and sculpture.

Why has the craft establishment so enthusiastically rejected the history and language of crafts – the tradition of crafts? The main reason seems to be a desire to find critical acceptance and a market share within the more celebrated fine arts world, a world which, they feel, has always looked on crafts with their connotation of utility as a vehicle unworthy as the conveyance of serious thought.

The rejection of the traditional crafts in favor of the tradition of modernist fine art by the craft establishment was relatively easy and painless. American culture that had no vital surviving tradition of craft, and therefore no interest or investment in craft as a language, has always been predisposed to the idea of the "new." Modern craftspeople, who began making work in the craft vacuum following World War II, showed for the most part little knowledge of and even less interest in crafts' sophisticated and complex language. Much of their early work merely floated on the surface of the craft language – making only the most superficial references without even questioning in a philosophical way what there was about craft that attracted them so strongly in the first place. Instead, when their infatuation faded and the lure of fine art status became irresistible, they simply abandoned it. That and an arrogance born out of cultural insecurity are part of the reason American crafts have premised their philosophical and aesthetic investigations on the past fifty years of American modernism rather than on the cross-cultural influence from thousands of years of craft tradition. Consequently, the idea and meaning of tradition, because it stood in sharp contrast to what was believed to be modern crafts' most important task – appearing to be avant-garde – was perverted to mean redundant, narrow, and derivative.

Modern craft, as it is celebrated in survey exhibitions such as *The Eloquent Object and Poetry of the Physical*, however, has done little to gain critical recognition for itself separate from the fine arts, nor has it succeeded in adding to or becoming part of the dialogue within the fine arts. Modern crafts is, in short, in such a muddled state and suffers from such a severe identity crisis that there are now, finally, sounds being made by some in the field that perhaps a scholarly approach to the history of craft might be an answer to modern crafts' dilemma.

T.S. Eliot, in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," says that tradition "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its

presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling of the whole of literature..." This historical sense, Eliot says, is what makes a writer traditional and at the same time makes him or her most acutely aware of his or her own contemporaneity. After all, Eliot says, "No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead."<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, Marcia and Tom Manhart, in their essay on "The Eloquent Object," tell us that "the old limits, old channels for expression having broken down, we need new descriptive categories and new standards: without them, in this world in flux, critical analysis – even simple conversation – is almost impossible."<sup>2</sup> They are, in essence, arguing that society has changed so greatly that the history and tradition of craft is no longer able to speak to us in a meaningful way or provide us with any kind of moral, philosophical, or aesthetic lessons. This is, of course, a ridiculous argument that can be refuted by countless examples of traditional crafts that have created resonances that can be felt as strongly today as they were when they were made. The Manharts' argument, which is essentially the same argument that the modern craft establishment advances, that modern crafts has to abandon its language and its tradition for the sake of "critical analysis and simple conversation," should be seen for what it is: a rationale that enables those who were trained in the crafts, but who have abandoned them for the language and tradition of modern painting and sculpture, to not only remain in the smaller, chummy, and less rigorous craft field but also to be seen as avant-garde or the cutting edge of the field. It is, in short, an attempt by a comfortably entrenched and self-satisfied group to have their cake and eat it too.

The time has come, however, for those in the craft establishment who find the craft language too constraining and no longer relevant to stop clinging to the craft field like a drowning man clinging to a life preserver and instead join the dialogue and critical discourse within the fine arts. Not only is the view of modern craft, expressed by the Manharts and embraced by the craft establishment, specious and untenable, but also it continues to fuel the opinion of many in the fine arts that modern craft does little more than borrow ideas and imagery from the fine arts, reproduce them in the craft medium, and then insist that these objects are so special and unique that they cannot be understood or criticized from the perspective of either modern painting and sculpture or the history of craft. It is this perception and not usefulness or references to crafts' history that makes craft such anathema to the fine arts.

I am not suggesting that craftspeople should start imitating or mimicking craft objects of the past or that to merely make reference to the craft tradition is all an object has to do to be successful. Work of this kind is likely to be as bad as the work of a craftsman that feels that the most important aspect of modern craft is to avoid references to tradition, like function, while replicating the most current trends in the fine arts.

What I am suggesting is that those artists who are drawn to the language of craft explore the depths of that language and struggle to find their own voice inside that language. That struggle to create mean-

## TRADITION AND THE MODERN CRAFTS ESTABLISHMENT

1 2 3

ing and communicate feeling inside the constraints of a language is precisely what keeps a tradition alive and makes it viable. A craftsperson should not be discouraged by the argument that the craft language is limiting. All arts, as Michael Cardew indicated, are limited in the sense that their apparatus of communication is inadequate for the content, which seeks expressing, and they are all engaged in squeezing eloquence out of their own inarticulate dumbness.

Those who represent the rather narrow and perverse view that modern craft should be judged by its eccentricity, pursuit of novelty, and rejection of history will continue to insist that anything recognizable as traditional crafts cannot be significant. This perspective not only makes one blind to the work of the craftsperson who makes deliberate and subtle use of crafts' language to create emotion and feeling that can be communicated in no other way, but also severely limits craft to expressing little more than fashionable trends in popular culture. The serious expression and communication of ideas and feelings can only be realized when a craftsperson exploits, not perverts, the craft language and uses it to full potential. To achieve this, artists have to be as aware and familiar with what has been said before as they are with what is being said at the moment.

But that is still not enough. To paraphrase Virginia Woolf: "The thing that really matters, that makes a craftsperson (writer) a true artist (writer) and his work permanent, is that he should really see. Then we believe, then there arise those passionate feelings that true crafts (books) inspire. It is possible to mistake crafts (books) that have this life for craft without it, hard though it is to explain where the difference lies. Two figures suggest themselves in default of reasons. You clasp a bird in your hands; it is so frightened that it lies perfectly still; yet somehow it is a living body, there is a heart in it and the breast is warm. You feel a fish on your line; the line hangs straight as before down into the sea, but there is a strain on it; it thrills and quivers. That is something like the feeling which live crafts (books) give and dead ones cannot give; they strain and quiver. But satisfactory works of art have a quality that is no less important. It is that they are complete."<sup>3</sup>

The kind of completeness Woolf describes cannot be achieved by a craftsperson with a myopic view of craft based on the chauvinistic belief that to be modern and therefore relevant, craft has to be explained in the narrow cultural context of Western modernism. It can exist only in the work of craftspeople that have immersed themselves in crafts' language and drawn on their knowledge of that language to transform mundane domestic objects into uncommonly poetic statements that cause us to reflect on the tenuousness of our existence. This is what makes traditional craft both modern and historical – in a word, complete.

## References:

1. From "Tradition and the Individual Talent," an essay by T.S. Eliot published in *Selected Essays*, London, 1932.
2. Marcia and Tom Manhart, *The Eloquent Object*, The Philbrook Museum of Art, 1987.
3. From an essay written in 1912 and included in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, published by Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich.