

the Q&A guide

Everything You Wanted to Know About Craft Art But Were Afraid to Ask

BY ANN COCHRAN, JANE FRIEDMAN AND KATHRYN MCKAY

Something special has caught your eye.

Maybe it happened during a museum visit, when you saw a figurative ceramic piece that really spoke to you. Or as you walked past a craft gallery and were struck by a certain piece of glass in the window playing with the light. Or during a party at the home of friends, when you discovered that the beautiful plates on the dinner table were all handmade.

Whatever the case, it opened your eyes to the world of American craft. And now, you can't seem to get enough of it.

Collecting craft can be tremendously appealing. It allows you to surround yourself with beautiful things, all created by hand with a level of skill and integrity that manufactured products just can't match. It also opens the door to meeting artists, visiting great new arts venues and interacting with thousands of people all over the country who share your passion.

For newcomers, however, getting your feet wet can be daunting—trying to educate yourself about individual craft materials and techniques, knowing how to approach that person standing behind the counter at a high-end art gallery, deciding how to focus your collection when so much is available, and discerning whether that “Wow!” piece is worth the hefty price.

Needless to say, if you are a fledgling collector, you probably have lots of questions. On the pages that follow, we hope to answer at least some of them in a primer for craft enthusiasts. Included are tips from collectors, an introduction to the basic craft mediums, guidelines for gallery etiquette, a rundown of great places to visit to see craft, and much, much more.

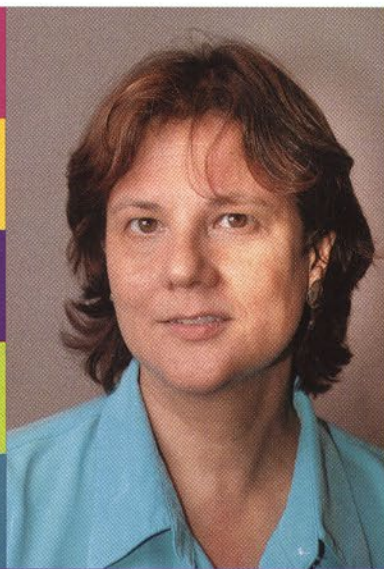
To help us with these questions, we enlisted the combined expertise and brainpower of two gallery owners, two longtime collectors, a major museum curator and an interior designer with a particular focus on craft. If you're an aspiring collector, this group will act as your personal mentors into the craft world. And even if you're already knowledgeable about crafts and collecting, these well-versed veterans can provide you with a new spin on things.

getting down to
BASICS

Before you can walk the walk, you've got to be able to talk the talk. In this section of the Q&A Guide, we'll introduce you to some terms you'll want to become familiar with and get you started in building your basic knowledge of American craft. Collecting is a continuous journey, and you'll find that there's always more to learn. That's what makes it so exciting.

MODERN CRAFT ARTISTS are continually pushing the envelope with traditional mediums. Here, Takayuki Sakiyama, represented by Joan B. Mirviss Ltd. in New York, heightens the effect of a stoneware vase with spiraling design sand and orange glaze.





Maurine LITTLETON

*Director, Maurine Littleton Gallery,
Washington, D.C.*

Since 1984, the Maurine Littleton Gallery has been featuring works by leading contemporary glass artists. Littleton is the daughter of Harvey K. Littleton, who has been called the father of the studio glass movement.

What about glass do you feel makes it so appealing?

Glass is unique in the way it responds to light—the same piece will have different personalities depending on how you light it.

How did having an artist as a father deepen your appreciation for and understanding of craft?

My father was not only an artist, but also a teacher, an active member of the craft community and a leader in many craft organizations. He had a strong curiosity about things. From the time I was quite young, there were always discussions about how things were made, so I came to the table with more understanding than many people have. My father also helped me understand the relationship between artists and galleries.

What do you hope new visitors walk away with following a visit to your gallery?

I hope they are impressed with the quality of the work that's exhibited. I hope they're really excited about what they see.

“In the last decade, there



I don't have a lot of money to invest in new craft purchases. Does that leave me out of the game?

Not at all. If you can afford to shop at a mid-range department store, you can certainly afford to buy handmade items. Judith Weisman, an interior designer and collector in Chevy Chase, Md., says that people just developing an interest in American crafts “can buy a lot in the \$50 to \$250 range, especially functional things.” Look for smaller items that you can use in your home, like glass vases and bowls or wooden candlesticks.

If you're interested in wearable fiber, start with smaller items like scarves, hats and shawls. If wood speaks to you, you don't have to settle for small wooden boxes or salad utensils. A handcrafted end table could cost as little as \$150. Jewelry is also an appealing starter category. For \$40 to \$200, you can own a unique necklace or bracelet designed by an artist and crafted by hand.

A good place to begin is in your own backyard. Mitch Berliner, an avid collector in Potomac, Md., recommends that beginners visit local or regional craft shows. “Talk to the artists and gain a visual appreciation for their work,” he says.

Veena Singh, the owner of Sansar Gallery, an American craft gallery in Bethesda, Md., says it is important to “use your eye and buy what attracts you. Disassociate yourself from the words ‘investment’ and ‘appreciation.’” If you buy a piece because it speaks to you, it won't matter how much it is worth in 20 years.

Are there such things as trends in craft?

Trends come and go in the consumer world, and craft art is no exception. Contemporary culture changes rapidly, and artists work hard to stay in tune with the times by refining their techniques, taking advantage of new technology and mixing mediums to suit their purposes.

Many artists have come to embrace both craft and fine art materials in their work. University art departments now offer classes that focus on craft materials in tandem with fine art courses such as painting, drawing and traditional sculpture. “What's invigorating is the emphasis on process and material, regardless of the medium, as

has been a merging of art and craft.”

—Maurine Littleton



COURTESY OF THOS. MOSER CABINETMAKERS

well as an emphasis on design,” says Jane Milosch, curator of the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C.

“In the last decade, there has been a merging of art and craft. Many craft objects appear increasingly highly designed,” says Maurine Littleton, director of the Maurine Littleton Gallery, a fine contemporary glass gallery in Washington’s Georgetown neighborhood.

Architecture’s computer-aided design is becoming more prevalent in the art world. Judith Weisman pointed to creative uses of technology that merge tradition with innovation, such as quilt artists who work with photo transfers. Nontraditional materials like plastic are also being used.

Another current trend is an increase in the production of studio furniture. Thos. Moser and Berthold Schwaiger, for example, craft traditional pieces with gorgeous woods and perfect joinery, while the Runyon Company specializes in handmade steel pieces.



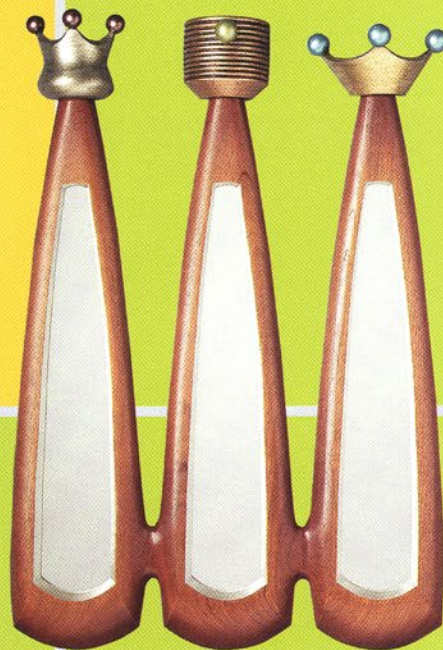
STUDIO ART FURNITURE

is popular among many collectors. Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers’ “Oval Ring Extension Table” and “Harpwell Chairs,” above left, and this chair by Berthold Schwaiger are both functional and meticulously handcrafted.

know thy CRAFT

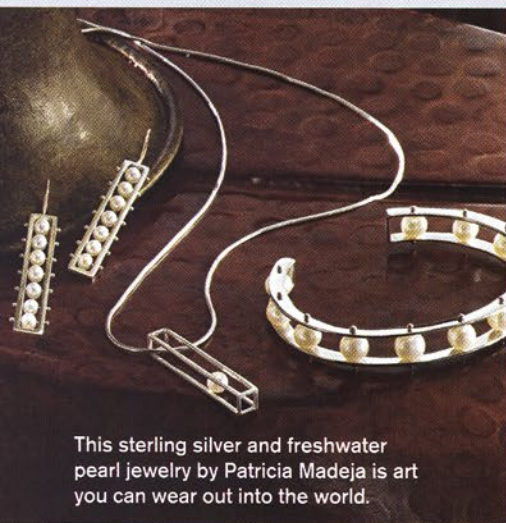
Just what does craft art consist of? The term embraces a number of mediums and forms: you can wear it, eat off of it, sit on it or hang it on your wall. Craft art is usually three-dimensional art that is judged by the skill of the creator's technique, not simply its aesthetics. To learn the basics, read about each category of craft and pick a favorite to begin researching.

WOOD: Wood art is one of the most accessible mediums for a beginner to purchase. Artists construct contemporary versions of chests, chairs, tables, bowls and spoons. Prices range from \$10 to \$20,000, and pieces are often one-of-a-kind or custom-built. The most common techniques are carving and turning, which can create pieces ranging from practical to sculptural. For information, check the Wood Turning Center at www.woodturningcenter.org or The Furniture Society at www.furnitureociety.org.



COURTESY OF THE GUILD

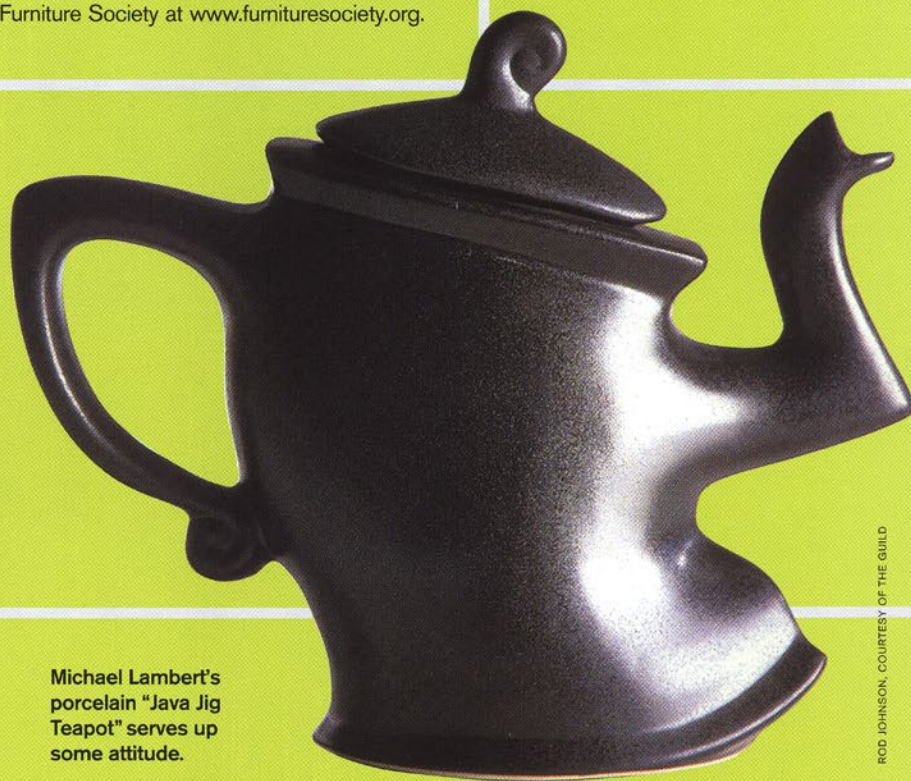
Wood artists like Brent Skidmore aren't afraid to go against the grain with their designs. His "Three Slender Kings" mirror is pictured here.



This sterling silver and freshwater pearl jewelry by Patricia Madeja is art you can wear out into the world.

COURTESY OF THE GUILD

JEWELRY: Craft jewelry is unique sculpture to wear. The necklaces, bracelets, pins, earrings and brooches made of silver and gold may be set with stones, hot-sculpted glass, enameling or found objects. These pieces are truly collector's items that are often one-of-a-kind. Prices range from \$50-\$15,000. Visit The Society of North American Goldsmiths at www.snagmetalsmith.org.



Michael Lambert's porcelain "Java Jig Teapot" serves up some attitude.

ROD JOHNSON, COURTESY OF THE GUILD

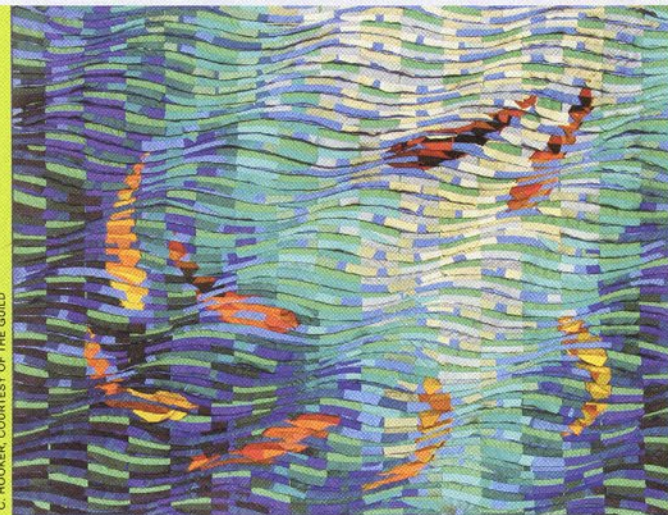
CERAMICS: Think beyond your mother's porcelain dinnerware set. Ceramic trays, luminaries, vases and tile are also made of earthenware (usually clay) or stoneware. Ceramics are traditionally wheel-thrown, hand-built or molded. The more modest prices range from \$50-\$500, which makes it an easy medium to begin collecting. Look at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts website at www.nceca.net.

METAL: Metal art can be garden art, home furnishings, interior architecture, sculpture, goblets, urns, silverware or jewelry. You name it, you can find it. Metals range from aluminum to gold. Metal is often cast, enameled, forged or fabricated. Prices range from \$10-\$5,000, depending on whether a precious or non-precious metal is used. Check out the artists at www.artmetal.com, or the links offered by The Society for Midwest Metalsmiths at www.midwest-metalsmiths.org.



Lisa Slovis Mandel's pewter and bronze "Exuberance Candelabra" is both durable and elegant.

COURTESY OF THE GUILD

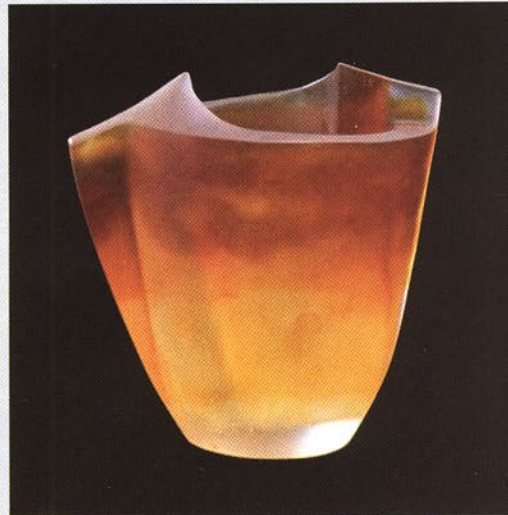


C. HOOKER, COURTESY OF THE GUILD

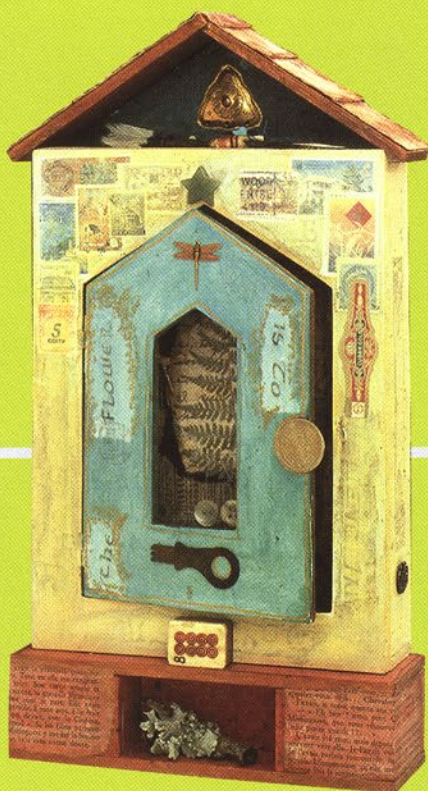
Brian Russell's "Wanganui 1 Vessel (Red-Orange)" is an example of cast glass.

Wall art doesn't have to be framed. Tim Harding's "Koi" fiber wall hanging is a great way to add color to a room.

BRIAN RUSSELL, COURTESY OF THE GUILD



FIBER: Fiber is usually cloth, but it also includes paper and baskets—anything fibrous is fiber art. Fiber artists create baskets, clothes, accessories, quilts, tapestries and sculptures. Fiber is pieced, quilted, hand-woven, knitted and crocheted. Expect clothing to range from \$50-\$900 and other art to range from \$200-\$2,000. Visit the Fiber Art Center at www.fiberartcenter.com or the National Basketry Organization at www.nationalbasketry.org.



DAVID EGAN, COURTESY OF THE GUILD

MIXED MEDIA: Mixed media is a label for any craft art that does not primarily consist of one medium. An artist may combine metal with glass, or wood with found objects.

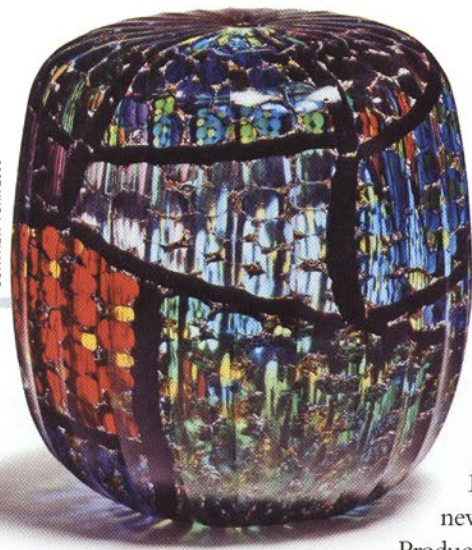
"To Plant a Flower," a mixed-media sculpture by Carol Owen, is made of paper and found objects.

GLASS: Glass art is one of the most popular mediums of contemporary craft. Glass is not only blown; it is cast, slumped, fused and flameworked. Investing in glass art adds color to your home in the form of serving dishes, vases, sculpture and modern chandeliers. Smaller vessels like perfume bottles start at around \$60; larger bowls or sculptures often exceed \$5,000. Visit the Art Alliance for Contemporary Glass at www.contempglass.org or the Glass Art Society at www.glassart.org for information.

Also be sure to check The Guild at www.guild.com. In addition to carrying a huge selection of high-quality hand-made pieces in all mediums, they offer helpful resources for beginners, including a glossary of terms. —CLAIRE PATTERSON

"You don't need to be fearful of not getting your

BARRY FRIEDMAN LTD.,
SOFA NEW YORK 2005



What are the differences between production, limited-edition and one-of-a-kind pieces?

Buying production pieces is a good way for new collectors to acquaint themselves with craft.

Production pieces are multiple re-creations of an original, so they tend to be less expensive. Although they are indeed sometimes made from a mold, each production piece is still "like a human being born. There is no cloning here. There are still variations in production pieces," says Jane Milosch.

Veena Singh agrees. "You don't need to be fearful of not getting your money's worth in a production piece. There can be great beauty in it. Each item is almost the same, but you can appreciate the differences."

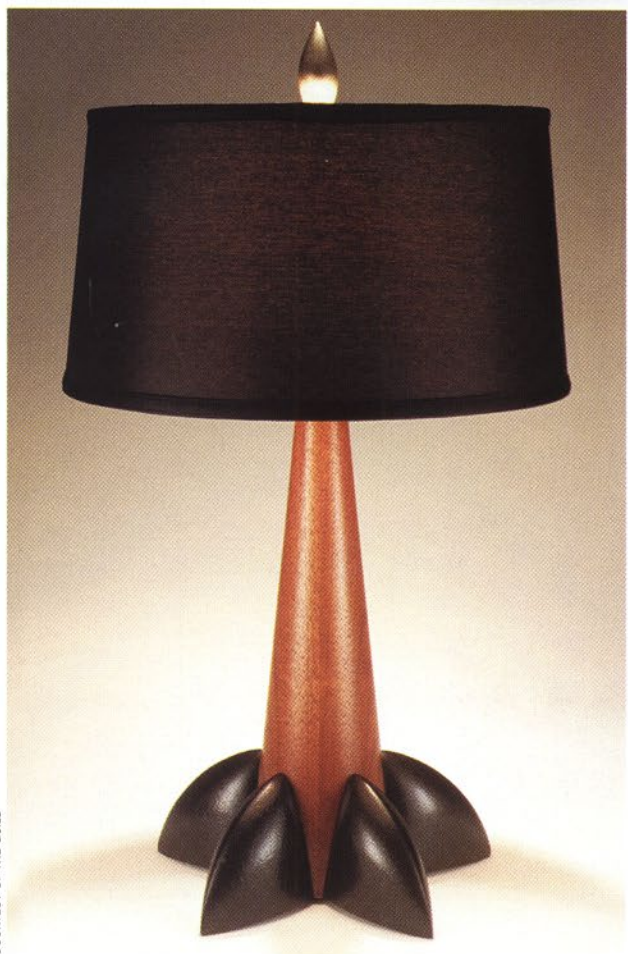
Looking at production pieces in the beginning of your collecting career can help you develop an appreciation for handcrafted items and discover exceptional artists, who often create limited-edition and one-of-a-kind works in addition to their production lines.

Limited editions are defined by a specific length of time (one year, for example) or a predetermined quantity to be created in the run. The idea behind a limited-edition work is that each be produced as closely as possible to the original work.

And then there are one-of-a-kind pieces, which are usually more expensive because of the time required to craft them. In fragile mediums like glass and ceramics, breakage is also factored into the price. Blowing glass, for instance, is a delicate process, and many versions can be shattered along the way to completing a masterpiece.

Where can I see and purchase art?

CRAFT FAIRS: You don't have to travel far. Fairs in your own town are great places to familiarize yourself with the wide world of American crafts. Daily and weekly newspapers generally run advance listings in their weekend calendar sections, and *AMERICANSTYLE* magazine publishes state-by-state advance listings of shows and events in every issue.



GLASS REMAINS one of the most popular mediums to collect. According to gallery owner Veena Singh, lighting is also rapidly moving up the ranks. Shown here are a hand-blown vase by Yoichi Ohira, represented by Barry Friedman Ltd. in New York, and Alejandro Fernandez-Veraud's "Cone (Five Feet)" table lamp.

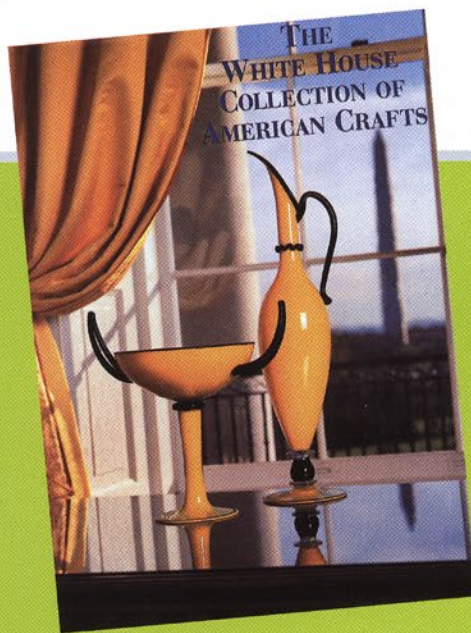
COURTESY OF THE GUILD

money's worth in a production piece.”

—Veena Singh



Books are a great way to immerse yourself in the past, present and future of American craft. And they are much more accessible than you'd think; many are brimming with colorful photographs of stunning work. Our experts put together a list of titles that an art enthusiast should have in his library:



The White House Collection of American Crafts

Michael Monroe

Harry N. Abrams, 1995

www.abramsbooks.com

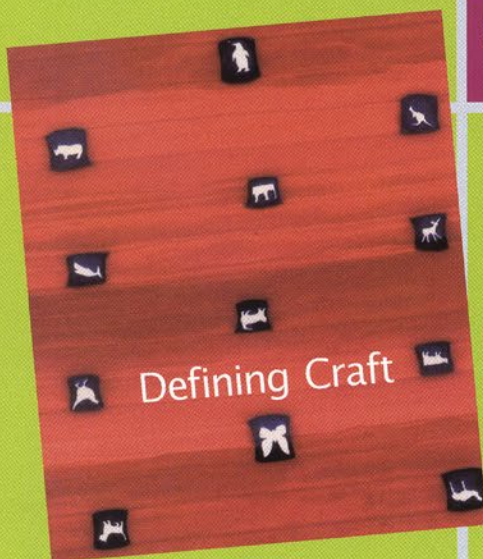
This book was created to complement an exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which featured 72 pieces installed in the White House during the Clinton administration.

The "500" Series

Lark Books

www.larkbooks.com

Each volume in this series provides a great overview of outstanding contemporary work in a given medium. Titles include: *500 Figures in Clay*, *1,000 Rings* and *500 Bowls*.



TITLES that speak volumes

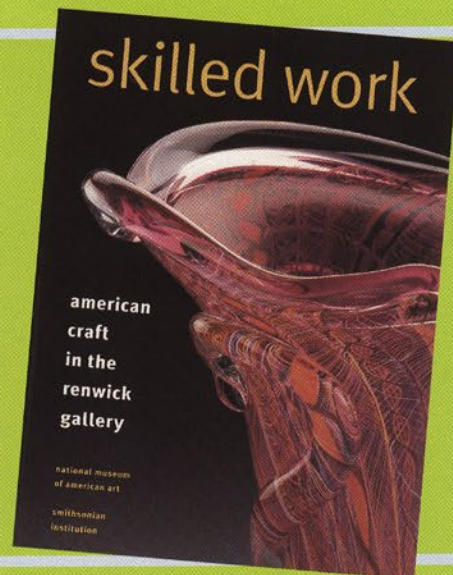
Defining Craft 1: Collecting for the New Millennium

American Craft Museum (now the Museum of Arts & Design), 2000

To order, contact:

thestore@madmuseum.org

This book honors today's skilled craftsmen who create beauty with materials that range from the precious to the commonplace.



Skilled Work: American Craft in the Renwick Gallery

Kenneth R. Trapp and Howard Risatti
Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998

www.americanart.si.edu/museum_info/onlineshop/books/title.cfml

Published in honor of the Renwick's 25th anniversary, this book details the development of the Smithsonian craft gallery and celebrates modern craft.



Jane MILOSCH

*Curator, Renwick Gallery,
Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Washington, D.C.*

Jane Milosch has been a curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery since October 2004. She was previously the curator of collections and exhibitions at the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art in Iowa. Her research interests include American craft, decorative arts and contemporary art.

What's in your personal craft collection?

Folk art pottery, majolica and lace work from Eastern Europe.

What do you feel is the most under-appreciated craft medium? Why?

This waxes and wanes, but presently I think it would be hand-raised hollowware, especially in sterling silver. Mass-produced designs in stainless steel and aluminum are ubiquitous, and are marketed as designer-line products, so there is little interest in collecting this kind of handmade work, which requires great technical skill and financial commitment.

What do you see in the future of American crafts?

A revival of historical styles with an emphasis on design. A new generation of artists, trained in craft, sculpture and design, will produce functional wares that challenge the notion of handmade by employing low-tech production techniques with high-tech tools. This is already happening.

“What’s invigorating is the



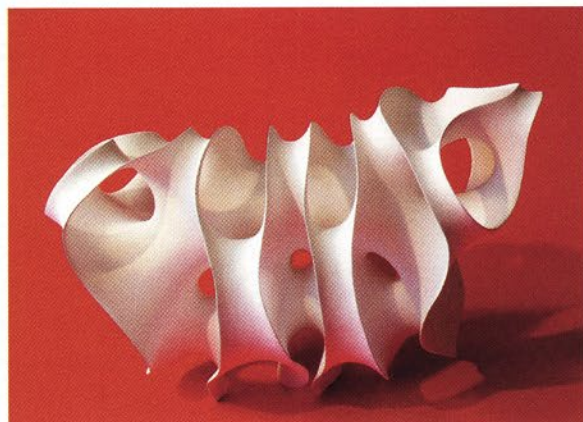
While you are at a fair, remember that “people love voyeurism; artists are glad to have you watch them work,” says collector Mitch Berliner. In addition to watching, ask a few questions, listen and learn. Larger craft fairs can give you a big-picture view of the types of objects available in each medium.

At craft fairs, you buy directly from the artist, but don't assume prices are always going to be lower than at galleries and shops. If an artist has gallery representation, he or she will generally sell work at the same retail price, no matter where it is being sold.

RETAIL SHOWS: Many retail shows embrace all mediums, but some focus on one specific type of craft. The Fine Furnishings Providence Show at the Rhode Island Convention Center and the International Quilt Festival in Houston are two examples of the latter. Some retail shows highlight artists from a particular region, but most invite artists from all over the country. (Look to the “Hitting the Road” section on page 106 to learn about juried retail shows.)

CRAFT GALLERIES: Galleries work hard to promote artists and develop their customer bases. They can be a great way for new collectors to learn more about artists and their artistic processes.

Artists want to spend time on their art, and gallery



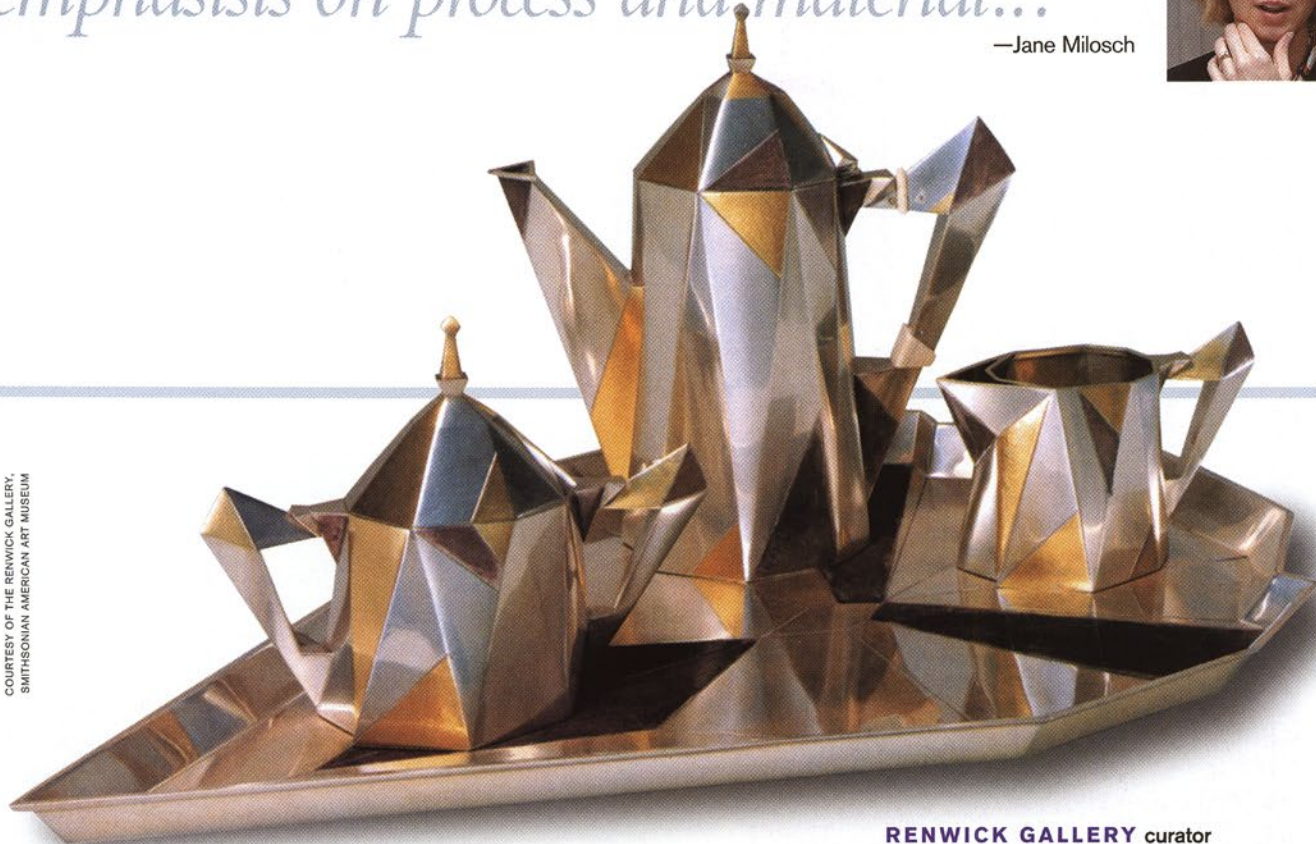
NANCY MARGOLIS GALLERY, SOFA NEW YORK 2005

emphasis on process and material..."

—Jane Milosch

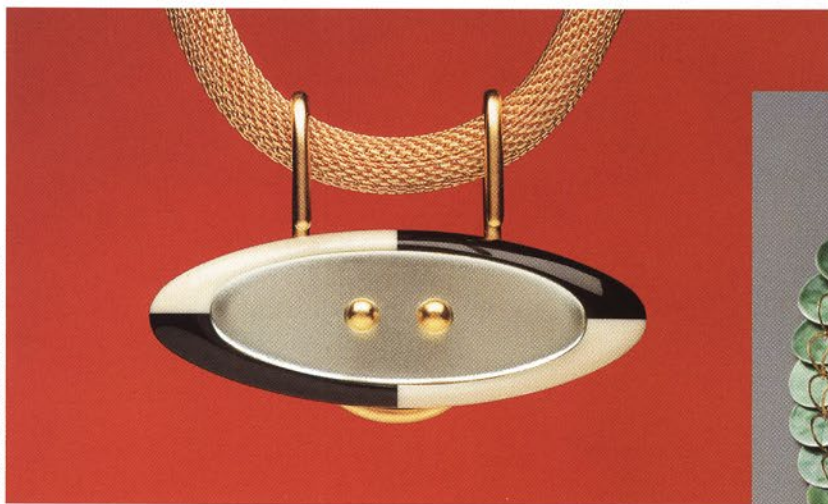


COURTESY OF THE RENWICK GALLERY,
SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM



RENWICK GALLERY curator Jane Milosch says silver hollowware is one of the most underappreciated craft forms. This "Cubic Coffee Service and Tray" by Erik Magnussen is on view at the Renwick through Jan. 22 as part of its "Modernism in American Silver: 20th Century Design" show.

LEO KAPLAN MODERN, SOFA CHICAGO 2005

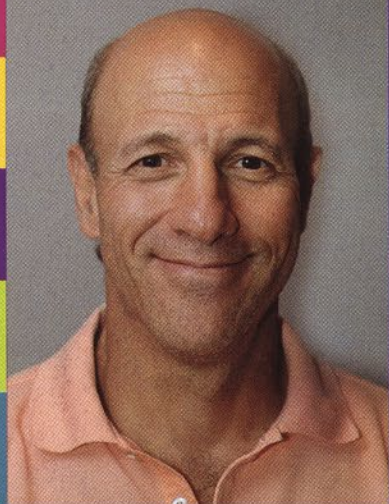


NECKLACES by Linda MacNeil, above, represented by Leo Kaplan Modern in New York, and Ralph Bakker, right, represented by Charon Kransen Arts in New York, are sculpture to wear. "Structure," left, by Eva Hild, represented by Nancy Margolis Gallery in New York, is sculpture for the home.

RALPH BAKKER,
CHARON KRANSEN ARTS, SOFA NEW YORK 2005



“People love voyeurism; artists



Mitch BERLINER

Collector, Potomac, Md.

Mitch Berliner, a food distributor, lives with his wife Debra in Potomac, Md. A longtime collector, he owns one of the largest private collections of studio art furniture by John Cederquist.

What types of pieces make up your collection?

It's really varied. We have quite a number of furniture pieces, primarily wood, a lot of glass, and some ceramics. We also have some fabric pieces.

How has your collection evolved over the years?

I've been collecting for so long, my collection has evolved as the craft movement evolved. Thirty years ago, there wasn't a lot out there that was super creative. As artists became more innovative with their use of materials and the development of new techniques, it opened opportunities for me as a collector.

How did you educate yourself on American craft?

The biggest thing I did was to go to as many craft fairs as possible, especially in the beginning. I never did have enough time to do a lot of reading or take classes. I have tried blowing glass, and that gives you a whole new kind of appreciation as a collector.

representation allows them that freedom. “Many artists spend years schlepping their wares to shows all over the country, paying to stay in hotel rooms, spending money on meals. Their goal is to get gallery representation, to get away from the business end of their work,” says Berliner. “Representation is a sign that they have ‘made it.’”

AUCTIONS: Keep your eye out for notices of local and regional fundraising auctions, especially those hosted by art schools, museums and arts groups. Call the organizers and ask about the art up for bid.

Arts organization fundraisers are prime places to find work by established and emerging artists. If you have the means and the nerve to raise your paddle and bid against other avid arts enthusiasts, you can walk away with stellar examples of contemporary craft, and help raise needed funds for nonprofit arts institutions as well.

I'm enamored with a particular craft (glassblowing, woodturning), and I'd like to try it myself. Where can I take classes?

Although no one needs to take a class to become a collector, learning what it takes to create art will give you a greater appreciation for the work and a better understanding of pricing. It shouldn't be too difficult to find a class that suits your needs, even if you have a busy schedule.

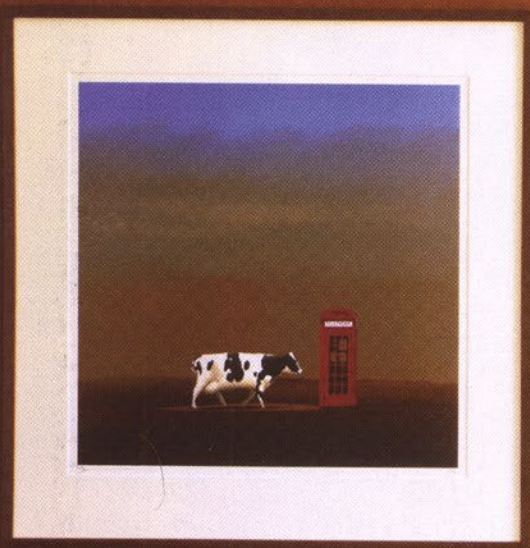
Classes are offered throughout the country, not just in larger cities. The Waterloo Center for the Arts in Iowa has pottery, woodcarving and drawing classes for as little as \$25. Salem Community College in Carneys Point, N.J., opened a glass center in 1999. Area residents take instruction in glass beads, glass ornaments and glass blowing for \$99-\$359.

For those who want an immersion or vacation experience, there's the Penland School of Crafts in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, which collector Mitch Berliner refers to as “summer camp for adults.” You can even combine a spa getaway with pottery classes at Ojo Caliente Mineral Springs in Taos County, N.M.

To find classes in your community, search the Internet or call your local college or arts center.

are glad to have you watch them work.”

—Mitch Berliner



Creating a unique living space can be as easy as adding a few handmade touches—leather pillows by Anna Millea, a glass bowl by Richard Jones or a print by Robert Deyber.