THE POSITION OF CRAFTS IN AMERICA TODAY

by Jay Doblin

To discuss the position of crafts in America today, I must become rather philosophical and fundamental in my approach. I must paint many factors black or white, without shades of grey, so that the points I shall make will be clear.

The objects men make fall into four basic categories: Art, Crafts, Design and Science. For purposes of clarification, these steps are arbitrary, so that comparisons can be made. Actually, it is a continuous scale, with aesthetics at one end and pure science at the other. But before we discuss the scale, we must define the terms.

Aesthetics pertains to the beautiful, rather than the useful. It deals primarily with emotional reactions. Aesthetics operates more or less according to the training and experience of the viewer. It is the area of sensuous experimentation.

Science, on the other hand, is the observing and classifying of measurable facts. Verifiable laws are established. Scientific laws, once proven, remain valid. Of course, in man's frail knowledge, he often assumes scientific accuracy without definite proof. As the knowledge of the scientist increases, it is compiled and passed from one to the next. In fact, science at any given moment is the total compilation of the factual knowledge of all men. But of course, nature indulges the scientist, because, as his circle of scientific knowledge increases, his circumference of ignorance also gets wider and more complex.

With aesthetics this is not so. Aesthetics stems from the emotions of each person. The fundamentals are indefinable, but can be appreciated by all, deepened by contact and practice. Aesthetics must be learned by every individual. Its total can never be greater than the appreciation of any individual. Aesthetic laws are not logical, regardless of how reasonable they may seem at any given period. They last only until the artist violates them in order to create new art forms.

Now let us return to the four steps: Art, Craft, Design and Science. I shall cite a group of examples selected because of
their similarities. They are all of brass and clear materials, and all in the modern form - some free-form and some fabricated form.

Art requires a personal emotional drive, a deep interest in symbolism. What would be left of value in a museum if the symbols were forgotten? Frames, blobs of color, frozen nature, meaningless lumps.

We have witnessed a fantastic revolution in the arts in the past 50 years. Realism, the imitation of nature, is disappearing. Today we appreciate form and color for themselves. Art is viewed for its aesthetic content alone, without regard for story content, sentimentality or portrayal of actuality.

The artist is motivated by the dictates of his emotions, in media chosen by some unexplainable attachment. He begins only with a drive and ends when that drive is either satisfied or frustrated.

A lens, a metal cone or a blank piece of paper may give complete aesthetic satisfaction to some - but these same things may be aesthetically meaningless to others.

Today we are more likely to appreciate these forms as the elements of art. Picasso, Brancusi, Matisse, Braque, Moore, Klee, Arp, Miro, Calder, Mondrian, Van Gogh, Bertoia, and a legion of others, have created a new visual world as revolutionary in art as the atomic age is to the scientist. The artist's investment is small, his materials cheap, often free. His work need not necessarily appeal to anyone. But then, the consumer is an individual appreciator.

For example, I will show you two pieces of brass sculpture - one with lenses in a cage, the other, a brass mechanism on a tripod. Neither has any utilitarian function. They are creations meant only to be beautiful. Here, too, is a Christmas tree ball - certainly the purest aesthetic form, yet only decorative except with sentimental overtones.

CRAFT: Here we find a very high level and percentage of aesthetics, coupled with more technical media and basic functions. Tools and materials are used which require great skill as well as elementary research. Direct relationship of the creator to the object is vital. He satisfies himself with the ultimate product. He creates as he builds. He creates not only the product, but his own appreciation of the product as well. This is one of the most important elements in crafts.
The function of the object is essentially its form. Production is low. The creator is temperamentally an artist. He does not want to repeat himself. He tries to evolve perfection. He is intense. His investment is moderately low. There is no need for wide mass acceptance.

Design is a more remote process. It combines both art and technology, in more or less equal percentages. The function of the object may be its form, or the function may be entirely enclosed in a symbol representing it (something known to the trade as "tin pants"). Examples are table radios, automobiles, wristwatches, etc. wherein the mechanism which actually produced the service is unseen. In these objects form often has a difficult time following function, because the function of music, space or time are not tangible.

The designed object is produced in greater quantities. Often functions are complex far beyond the ken of the designer.

The tool of the designer is the factory. Large investments and responsibilities face him. He must have mass acceptance. He must promise guaranteed solutions and sales. He must meet competition. He must design with a group. The motivation for this work is problem-solving (usually with sales motives), rather than emotional drive.

The designer may or may not follow his own aesthetic dictates. He is faced with two blunt alternatives (1) to impose his tastes on the public, or (2) to half-heartedly design on a level which he believes will sell, but which he may himself disdain. He does not design for himself.

Costs are terribly important, because of the large multiplier. Multiply any amount by 1,000,000 and the total will be impressive. Since the designer cannot design directly in mass production, he uses a paper approach. Thus he is disconnected from his product. He must understand machine finishes. Accidents are perilous.

Science permits no aesthetics, only cold logic and judicial decision. Theories must be tested and proven before they are valid. Analysis is the technique of the scientist. Compare the curricula of engineering with that of the artist. One is analysis and test, the other involves the sensitizing of the individual.
Is it possible that the spectrum of which I spoke earlier is actually a circle of aesthetics with increasing and decreasing amounts of scientific content?

WHERE DESIGNER MEETS CRAFTSMAN

Of course the spaces between are also interesting. Here we have the artist-craftsman who employs complex tools for purely aesthetic purposes. Next, the craftsman-designer, who works directly in his own media, without paper barrier, yet places his completed work in low production and employs others to increase his productivity. And then the designer-technician, who creates scientific, yet highly aesthetic, objects—bridges, cameras, boats, etc.

The craftsman has a strong affinity with the designer-technician in this respect. For example, the person who seriously sails in competitions over a period of time will eventually own a truly beautiful sailboat. The “Sunday yachtsman” (pity the novice!) will probably own a boat covered with gimbals and tailfins.

Man is both an emotional and a practical animal. He has invested his tools to increase his comfort, broaden his sensibilities and boost his production. But the emotional and practical content of his creations are equally important. Both must be developed.

Fortunately, when most things are well engineered, they also have high aesthetic content. When things are right, they look right, and the most “right” in any given area will become a classical example. The product designer knows that his 1957 “widget” will be good until 1960, if he is lucky. He himself must exceed it at that time. Where open areas of aesthetic decision are large, the stylist runs a chance of spoiling design. His only chance is to use basic taste not stylisms or symbolisms.

THE PLACE OF CRAFTSMANSHIP IN INDUSTRIALIZED SOCIETY

Crafts face an enigma – the impact of mass-produced goods creates a profound effect. Good design cannot be accomplished when we set out to design for the average. It must have behind it the drive of a competent person with strong convictions, who designs for himself. The engineering can be accomplished by a group, because this is more of a mechanical process. Still, the style, because of its aesthetic content, needs the strength of an individual. If we look back on all really good products, we find
the hand of some one person who drove the project from beginning to end

Today we can't get along without TV, the telephone, clocks, lights, vacuum cleaners, plumbing, fountain pens, safety razors and refrigerators. Our standard of living is based on these. More and more, these products become the symbols of our culture. Gifts are now toasters or coffee-makers, rather than candelabra. And the toaster looks more like a trophy rather than something to brown bread. Big gifts come from Cadillac rather than Cartier.

Here are the reasons why we desperately need more and better crafts

(1) The craftsman does not lose the relationship of his product to its materials, production processes and its purpose, because of his direct contact with it, and his continuous building of his appreciation for that particular product.

(2) He is the basis of continued individuality, because highly complex products cannot be produced with small variations. Automation will make this more impossible.

(3) The craftsman is the proving-ground and the leader of public and professional taste. Mass-produced products must be produced at a lower level to appeal to the masses. Only a small percentage of the buying public wants something new. The larger percentage wants something they are familiar with, with some improvements or "gimmicks". It is the province of the craftsman to satisfy the demands of the discerning few, and also to set standards of taste.

(4) Crafts should replace the appalling souvenir and gift markets. These are the worst possible areas of American production.

(5) Crafts are the basis of teaching product design. Obviously, you cannot teach a student to design in mass production techniques. He is first taught the aesthetics of form through sculpture and the use of fabricated materials—such as straws, dowels, wire, sheet materials, etc. He then learns to appreciate both hand and power tools and their possibilities. At this point he is given a thorough course in crafts, combining high proportions of aesthetics with simple functional objects which he constructs himself, on low production shop equipment. Only in his final year does he begin to design on paper. Good crafts form the basis for this type of education.
But to do this job, crafts must do 4 things

1. Begin to work in the modern form. Derivations of European or archaic objects cannot succeed. We need an indigenous modern American craft.

2. The use of new materials and tools must be explored. Adding variable speed drives to the potter's wheel and electric control to the kiln is not enough. The same forms and products with minor variations will continue. We live in a golden age of new materials. We must develop a new aesthetics based on these materials.

3. We must find functions for those craft objects which are necessary to today's civilization. Good decorative pieces - vases, bowls, bottles, etc. - are fine, but what about the thousands of tools, implements, appliances and fixtures for which a need has been created?

**CREATING FOR TODAY**

The attitudes toward crafts are different today than when crafts began. The pot was then the highest level of technology, it performed a vital role. You are aiming now too much for the gallery, rather than the public. Stop designing for shows. This is as bad as designing for mass sales, possibly worse.

We must produce in sufficient quantity to supply outlets and put prices within the grasp of the average person. Europe seems to be able to handle this problem admirably, particularly in glassware, furniture and table-ware. It takes courage and resourcefulness to expand into small production. Techniques must be improved and experimented with, so that quality is not sacrificed. A product may be different, but it should not be less good.

There is a wide open field for these craft objects. High-production brand merchandise is being removed from the traditional retailer who stood behind these products and is being sold at cut-rate prices through marts. The public now knows that model RF-10 is the same, no matter where it is purchased, it is guaranteed by the factory. This is the basis of today's advertising. The large retailers, to keep their gross income up, must have goods of this type, shoppers' merchandise. You will
notice how they are opening boutiques, gift shops and import bazaars in their high traffic locations.

You craftsmen have the wonderful opportunity to make a tremendous contribution to the culture, comfort and happiness of America, to build a solid basis for your crafts, if you can resolve some of the practical problems and aesthetic drives.