

A Very Short History of Studio Craft
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There was a time when making things by hand was utterly unremarkable. Everything that was made, was made by hand. Craft was so pervasive that nobody gave it a second thought.

There were some attempts to give special status to certain enterprises. During the Renaissance, an argument was made to separate painting and sculpture from all other objects. The argument worked, and that's why we have this special category of stuff called "art." Debate about the exact nature of "art" has continued ever since, but one constant has remained. "Art" is thought to be better than ordinary things.

Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution changed the way many ordinary things were made. Textiles were woven on vast power looms; cast iron replaced wooden structures; die-stamping pushed specialized techniques like chasing aside. In glass, freehand blowing was supplanted by blowing into metal molds. Still, no practical distinction was made between making things by hand and making things with machines. It was all regarded as manufacture. Handwork continued to be unremarkable.

Basically, to make objects was to have a trade. Some trades have survived, and they attract no commentary. A roofer installs roofs, a mechanic fixes cars. We do not give their products any special stature. We judge tradesmen on the utility of their work. All we care about is that the roof doesn't leak and the car runs better.

Now, I don't think too many people reading this book think they are tradesmen. Any flameworker worth her salt thinks she's doing something that operates on a higher level than a roof that doesn't leak. She is unlikely to think that the best thing she can aspire to is everyday utility. (Usefulness is part of the equation, but only part.) She believes her work stands apart from the vast flood of mass-produced objects we see in the malls. She doesn't think her work should end up in second-hand stores or landfills. She doesn't make junk. She makes something special.

The idea that to make something by hand is to make something special did not happen by accident. It was invented in England in the mid-1800s.

We can trace this idea back to two Victorian gentlemen, John Ruskin and William Morris. Ruskin, the older of the two, loved medieval churches. He particularly loved Gothic ornamental carving, which is often a bit crude. He contrasted Gothic carving with the 19th century fashion for neo-classical decoration. Neo-classical ornament was completely formulaic. All the details were generated by a set of rules. The carver had no say in the design. In effect, he was reduced to being a human machine.

Ruskin hated this. He hated that the worker had zero creative input. And he hated the result: the cold precision of Neo-classical decoration just pissed him off. Instead, he loved the funky irregularities of the Gothic, which he ascribed to the lack of skill among Gothic carvers. But they did have the advantage of creative agency: the power to make their own decisions and then use their hands to make their ideas real.

Ruskin's connection between handwork and empowerment was revolutionary. Craft was no longer beneath notice. Handwork was special because it produced aesthetically superior results. And more importantly, it dignified the laborer. Ruskin made us all see that handwork has its own value, even a moral force. In his eyes, craft humanizes us.

Anybody who has flipped burgers for a living and then turned to a life in craft understands Ruskin's point. Today's equivalent to Neo-classical carving is all the mind-numbing scutwork that goes on in fast-food joints and call centers everywhere.

William Morris was (briefly) a student of Ruskin's, and quickly became a convert. Unlike Ruskin, Morris actually worked with his hands. Over the course of his life, Morris took up embroidery, book illumination, loom weaving, natural dyes, tapestry, printing, and several other crafts. In doing all this, he learned that making things by hand can be enjoyable.

Victorians were used to thinking of handwork as merely a job, a livelihood for the working classes. The concept of pleasure in labor was almost shocking. No longer was craft a means to an end, but it became an end to itself. Working with one's hands can be deeply satisfying. And that satisfaction can be meaningful. Again, everyone who reads this book probably understands this intuitively. But in 1870, it was a revelation.

In a sense, Ruskin and Morris gave permission to non-tradesman to work with their hands. Painters took up embroidery; wealthy dilettantes took up pottery; housewives took up woodcarving. Inspired amateurs were an important part of the Arts & Crafts movement, and several of them went on the start influential businesses. Rookwood Pottery, for instance, was founded by Maria Longworth Nichols, whose involvement with ceramics began when she took up china painting as a hobby.

Glass, however, was not for amateurs. The two companies most associated with Arts & Crafts that produced glass were Tiffany and Steuben. Both were essentially factories, in which skilled craftsmen produced objects that were designed by someone else. Glassblowing was done by men working around large coal-fired furnaces. Glass was a material for businesses that could afford the high cost of capital investment. Nobody thought of a way for glass to be worked by an individual maker.

The Arts & Crafts movement fizzled and died in the 1910s, but the impulse to make things for pleasure had taken root. Through the 1920s and 30s a modest number of artists worked in crafts like batik, ceramics and woodworking. Amateurs took up weaving and jewelry making. But during that period, we can only point to one man who worked with glass in a small studio setting. This was Frederick Carder, who had been the head designer for Steuben. When his designs fell out of favor, the company forced him to retire. They gave him a little studio in the factory, though, and Carder began to experiment with casting glass. His output was small, consisting of figure and animal sculptures. Still, he proved that a solo craftsman could work in glass.

In the 40s and 50s, Modernism infiltrated the crafts. There was one kind of Modernism in design – functional, straightforward, and usually undecorated – and another in the fine arts – abstract, expressive, and gestural. Modernist design was an import from Europe, where it had national variations. In Germany, it was hard-edged and often intended for industrial production. The Scandinavian version was softened and was often made of natural materials like wood and wool. In the United States, the two tendencies were lumped together under the label “Good Design,” and were vigorously promoted by the Museum of Modern Art. As for Modernism in art, its most famous manifestation was Abstract Expressionist painting. Jackson Pollack's drip paintings are a notorious example of the style.

About the same time, small kilns became available for firing pottery. They weren't designed to melt glass, but they could be used for fusing and slumping. (Collectively, these techniques are now known as “warm glass.”) Ceramist Edris Eckhardt taught herself how to formulate glass and then cast it in a kiln. The husband-and-wife team of Michael and Frances Higgins became experts in fusing glass and adding patterns in enamel. Their bold, brightly colored plates and decorative screens were wildly popular.

It's thought that the first American to explore flameworking for expressive ends was John Burton. Flameworking has a long history, first for making glass beads, and more recently in the production of scientific glass. But lab glass was a trade, and in the United States remained cut off from the world of studio craft. Burton, an English metallurgist, first saw glassblowing during a visit to a small glassblowing shop in Holland. (This was probably in the 1910s.) Inspired, Burton determined to

work glass on his own. Back home, he set up a torch and began the difficult process teaching himself. His method was strictly trial and error.

Burton moved to the United States in 1927, settling in California. Although he pursued his craft only in his spare time, he became the leading spokesperson for flameworking in this country. Burton used Pyrex rod and tube. Most of his work consisted of small vases and containers, along with a few blobby sculptures. One of his most important contributions was coloring clear borosilicate glass with metal oxides.

Until the early 1960s, Americans thought it was too difficult to downsize the furnaces needed to melt glass for offhand blowing. In 1962, a ceramist named Harvey Littleton (whose father worked for Corning Glass) built a little furnace in a disused garage on the grounds of the Toledo Museum of Art, and tried blowing. A group of students and teachers accompanied him. At first, nothing worked. They were using the wrong glass. But they soon started using glass marbles that a scientist named Dominik Labino had formulated for Johns-Manville, and they were on their way. Studio glassblowing had come to America.

The first results were heavy and awkward – some were downright hideous – but intoxicating. Littleton, Labino, and Marvin Lipofsky (a student of Littleton's) eventually learned how to control molten glass on the blowpipe. All three soon abandoned the vessel format, preferring to make sculpture instead. Littleton's work was lyrical and rhythmic, Lipofsky's wildly funky. (In a typically 60s gesture, he flocked some of his blown glass sculptures.) Both taught in art schools, so neither had to make a living from their work. Still, as pioneers of the studio glass movement, they helped develop a market.

The idea of making sculpture from craft mediums was not new, but it received an energetic jolt in the mid-1950s. The jolt was administered by a potter, Peter Voulkos. He had the good luck to visit the studios of several prominent New York painters in the summer of 1953, and apparently was much impressed. By 1957, he was making big gestural clay sculptures. He would roughly stack thrown forms one on top of another, or make them stick out into space. All resemblance to pottery vanished. Voulkos's sculptures were abstract, vigorous and seemed to completely lack refinement (which was not true).

The craft world was shocked. Having struggled to master their medium, many potters felt he was thumbing his nose at 5000 years of ceramic history. Others were not ready to acknowledge Abstract Expressionism, even though it had been around for more than a decade.

But many craftspeople realized that the whole game had changed. The spare, simple forms of Modernist design were suddenly obsolete, or perhaps more appropriate to industrial design than studio craft. Ambitious craftspeople were no longer content to make tasteful, useful objects. They wanted to make sculpture, they wanted to make it big, and they wanted it to carry an emotional wallop.

This impulse worked best in ceramics and fibers. The scale of ceramic sculpture was limited by the size of the kiln, but that could be a good five or six feet. Initially, weavers were limited by the width of their looms, but soon off-loom techniques like knotting or coiling expanded the scale of fiber sculpture to entire rooms. Furniture grew to fill rooms, too. In the early 70s, glass artist Dale Chihuly figured that he could make enormous glass installations by accumulating dozens of blown elements. On the other hand, jewelry, silversmithing and flameworking could never be made huge, and missed out on the trend.

The studio craft world soon divided into two camps. On one side was the production community: people who repeated designs for sale and typically made functional work. They saw their work as operating in the traditions of craft, and public demand was seen as proof of the quality of their work. The craft-sculpture hybrids, in their eyes, were self-indulgent and pointless.

Trouble is, there has always been a component of craft that is dedicated to display, not to use. Table centerpieces, trophies, decorative carvings, funeral sculptures, vases made only to be looked at: these kinds of objects have been made for millennia. If utility is defined as fulfilling a physical function, like holding potato chips or keeping somebody warm, none of them are useful. Voulikos's sculptures merely continued a centuries-old tradition of craft objects made for aesthetic pleasure.

On the other side of the divide stood the artist-craftsmen. They saw their work as pure and progressive, while production work was imitative and compromised by market considerations. But this view is also wrong-headed. The market is basically a feedback system, and serving people's needs has its own long and honorable history. Nobody disparages industrial design because it's geared to the marketplace.

Perhaps the sense that art is superior to useful things was an outgrowth of the hothouse atmosphere in art schools. Fortunately, teachers now realize that not all their students can become artists, and they have to prepare them for making production craft just as much as making art. Students in art schools, though, usually want to make art.

Despite these silly arguments, studio crafts grew and prospered. Craft fairs, which started in the 19th century as tiny informal affairs, grew into a big business in the 1980s. Galleries devoted exclusively to craft started opening in the 70s, and by the mid-1980s galleries that handled only one medium were common.

Of all the craft mediums, glass was the most successful in the upscale market. Glass objects were already familiar as collectibles, with figures like Tiffany and Gallé commanding high prices. Collectors felt no sticker shock when glass artists demanded a similar price structure. When glass teachers got together to form their own medium group, the Glass Art Society, they wisely invited collectors to participate right from the beginning. By the mid-1980s, collecting glass became a fashionable thing to do, and there were tales of wealthy individuals starting glass collections with million-dollar investments.

Glass had a great success story: Dale Chihuly. A master of self-promotion, Chihuly perfected the art of public relations. He published a series of glossy, all-color books. He named each one of his series. He hired superb glassblowers to produce his work, and reinvented himself as an artist-impresario. Americans loved it. Fortunately, he was also a talented and innovative artist. His nested baskets and Venetian-inspired chandeliers are unforgettable. Chihuly became the first international rock star of glass.

Flameworking has its own heroes: Paul Stankard, Jay Musler and Ginny Ruffner among them.

In the 21st century, studio craft continues to change. The established marketplace for production craft is in decline, strangling on its own standards of professionalism. However, a new marketplace has emerged from DIY, punk, and political activism. In addition, new ways to market craft like Etsy.com have evolved.

The definition of sculpture has changed as well. Sculpture used to be three-dimensional objects. But sculptures are now hybrids, or maybe more accurately, combinations. Video, performance, installation and social systems are all deployed as sculpture. In one notable example of how far sculpture has departed from objects, Cai Guo-Qiang is famous for making art that consists entirely of fireworks. All the old boundaries have blurred, and adventurous artists cross them all the time.

Craftspeople participate in the blur. A collaborative performance group called "The B Team" produced extravaganzas complete with dancers, music and theatrical glassblowing. Artists like Rika Hawes make installations. One of her recent pieces is called "Liar Liar," in which a video of several

people telling a story about how Rika got a scar above her eyebrow is projected through about 100 hanging glass lenses. Is it craft? Is it art? Does it matter what category it falls into? What remains constant is attraction to the work itself – getting hands on a material and doing something with it. Ruskin and Morris were right. Craft empowers, dignifies and satisfies. That much will never change.

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