

## Craft, Design and Art

2,864 words

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Issues of craft, design and art inevitably come into focus when people use tools and their hands to make things. As they proceed with their work, they also ask themselves questions about the look and feel of what they are putting together.

These factors have always been addressed, no matter what the specific purpose may have been. An example comes to mind from the time of the Roman Empire. Back then, hot melted glass was blown into the shape of a bottle, because people needed a container that would safely hold pharmaceuticals or cosmetics. Coincidentally, they considered how attractive the vessel could be and the best way to produce it. Similar questions come into play today if someone wants to structure a dimensional form in glass, whether the underlying reason is primarily utilitarian, decorative or artistic.

Central to all of these concerns are the talented individuals who are driven by strong internal impulses to make objects that did not exist earlier. A small number of them manage to make the most of their need to be creative, entirely on their own,—without attending art school or even pursuing courses at some local venue. Somehow they learn, mostly through trial and error, to exercise the skills needed to become recognized and successful.

A few become apprenticed to masters who help guide their progress in existing studios. They *learn by doing* and eventually reach a degree of maturity that allows them to function as masters in their own right.

Others take specialized study at post-secondary technical institutes, art schools or two-year community college programs geared to preparing them for rewarding careers devoted to making objects in glass and other materials. Some undertake formal classes at colleges and universities that provide four to six years of specialized instruction in different areas of the creative arts and award bachelor of fine arts and master of fine arts degrees.

No one single career path is right for everyone. What works best for one person may be inappropriate for another. In addition, while some creative people are determined to be successful on a vocational/professional level, there are others who pursue a life in art purely for their own personal satisfaction.

In the end, what matters most of all is that the talent and desire for making interesting and appealing objects should be honored by those who have been thus blessed as well as those who appreciate their work. As part of their human makeup, they cannot help feeling they have something worth sharing with others. Whether they eventually call themselves artists or not, they have a compulsion to externalize what they are pushed from within to make or say.

Ultimately, they use systems of working in an artistic form called craft and design to implement and evaluate their need for expression. Until all the forces that motivate that drive are satisfied, they simply cannot rest.

In addition, as gifted people go about their work, they often *invent* procedures that join their ideas and some raw material to arrive at a concrete product. These processes of invention and execution are basic to the creative process. Without them, finished products cannot be brought into being. After all, such objects do not make themselves.

While preparing for a future career as an artist, duplicating procedures that others have initiated may be helpful for learning certain working techniques. However, simply imitating the finished work of someone else denies genuinely creative people the opportunity to bring what is uniquely theirs into the world. Unless an object is authentically original, it lacks a distinctive artistic integrity a true spirit of genuine uniqueness. Such efforts are forgeries, merely imitations of what has already been created by someone else. No matter how cleverly done, at the highest levels of professional accomplishment, such theft of ideas and practice is not only frowned upon, it is also never justified.

On the other hand, in the area of quantity-production practice, such as the field of modestly priced giftware, the culture of the marketplace does not generally place high premium on originality. In this venue, it is not uncommon for imitation to be the rule rather than the exception.

Judgments of how well some finished objects are made generally remains in the eye, the heart and the head of any individual beholder. However, there can be no doubt that the sincerely objective opinions of *informed and experienced* individuals are virtually always regarded with more respect than those offered by people with a merely casual, otherwise *uninformed*, point of view.

### ***Craft***

Over the years, the word *craft* has had a variety of meanings. Before the contemporary period, the term referred principally to making objects by hand for either decorative or utilitarian purposes. In addition, from the time of the most ancient civilizations, a special area of craft activity was devoted to making jewelry.

When they were created to fulfill some ornamental function, the appearance of such hand-crafted selections received considerable attention. By contrast, if they were made to merely serve an ordinary need, such as a glass water pitcher for use at mealtimes, they were frequently produced with relatively little concern for how attractive they were. In addition to glass, such manually shaped products were also made from clay, fiber, metal and wood.

Across the centuries, in various places, efforts were made by many different craftspeople to improve the status given to their chosen discipline. The reason for this may have been a desire, going back at least to the time of the Renaissance to enjoy the respect and recognition accorded people working in the fine arts, namely painting, large-scale sculpture and architecture.

Many connoisseurs felt that *fine* artists proceeded on a level reserved for visionary poets and brilliant philosophers, as exemplified by such Renaissance period artists as Raphael Sanzio and Leonardo da Vinci. By comparison, the men and women who pursued handcrafts, such as those who made stained glass windows, were viewed by society as rather menial working people, just a small step above ordinary laborers.

A major change in this outlook came into being in the period following World War II in America. The dichotomy that had long separated the fine arts from handcrafts took a new turn when a development called the *studio-crafts movement* evolved and gradually came into its own. This has continued to the present time.

Today, increasing numbers of people focus on making a life for themselves in the decorative arts. They do so with the depth and intensity of purpose once reserved for commitment to a career in the serious fine arts. Whatever academic distinctions may have existed between them has diminished almost to the point of non-existence. Instead, the emphasis is on the making of significant esthetic objects, regardless of the traditional attitudes and expectations formerly employed in bringing them to fulfillment. Above all, the use of the word craft has come to refer to the high degree of disciplined control individuals apply to shaping a high quality finished object.

During their period of career preparation, many students try to learn as much as they can about their chosen raw materials and *working techniques*. The emphasis is upon discovering a material's structural potentialities and limits. The more they develop command over the working characteristics of the raw material, the more they enhance their ability to impart a sense of confidence in the skills used to make their work. At the same time, they try to widen their imaginative horizons and deepen their expressive powers.

Furthermore, they know their creative efforts will have to stand the test of competitive comparison with the working skills demonstrated by others when they present their accomplishments to potential consumers in the marketplace. They also know their output will be subject to evaluations based on the initial visual impact of what they have to offer.

While it is not, strictly speaking, a craft consideration, a collateral factor adding significance to the overall spirit of a given object is that it be *timely*. Being aware of what is current and not dated may well prove to be a practical fact of life for those concerned with what the marketplace may have to offer.

Ultimately, the *pursuit of excellence* is the principal goal a craftsman/artist seeks to achieve. This is at the heart of what sound craftsmanship is really about.

## *Design*

At one time, the term *design* referred to some ornamental enhancement of primarily utilitarian objects. For example, a lighting device in the home may have been

decorated by adding some pretty leaf patterns to mask the supposed ugliness of the fixture. Today, artists and public alike tend to feel such practice is ludicrous.

Instead, the term design is used to suggest the process of *organizing* a visual piece of work. For practical purposes, this concern with design is the foundation, along with a consciousness of craft discipline, on which virtually all work in artistic form is based.

At its most fundamental level, the language of design consists of a vocabulary made up of different *elements* of visual awareness. Specifically, they are: point, line, plane, texture, color, pattern, density, interval and space. The world of three-dimensional form also includes the elements: light, mass and volume.

There is no end to how the human imagination can manipulate and distribute these elements to fashion an exciting, fresh and unexpected form, one able to attract and hold the attention of a viewer.

Certain *principles* are always present in the design of a well-conceived piece of work. Regardless of what medium an artist employs, these basic design principles are universally applicable.

First and foremost, to be considered a soundly finished product, an object must show evidence of having a sense of overall organic *unity*. Its presence can be felt when all the parts of a two-dimensional composite or a three dimensional object fuse together into a soundly integrated, seamless whole.

Likewise, unless an object is *well-balanced*, it cannot be said to be successful. This is a matter of equilibrium. Every part of the piece should be so well distributed that each one looks as though it is in its proper place. Without such a total feeling of balance, a piece of artwork lacks stability and promotes a sense of unease or disinterest.

Mother Nature provides a vast range of examples of balanced order from which artists may learn a great deal. When events and circumstances in the natural scheme of things are not balanced, the overall situation is obviously out of kilter-out of proper accord. We can tell this is so because our capacity for *intuitive* awareness and judgment points it out. We can tell an object lacks balance, because it does not feel right. Of course, on occasion, some artists deliberately impose imbalance to make a point, but that is usually jarring to the viewer and can detract from the overall beauty of the work.

Next, there is the principle of *rhythm*. When present, it animates a piece of work. The energy it contributes can be brought into play in various ways. The most frequent one is probably regular repetition. This occurs when the *same* specific element appears with some frequency. By comparison, irregular repetition occurs when *variations* of an element are used again and again within the overall conception.

A fourth principle is *emphasis*. This refers to the way an element or a particular feature of an overall configuration becomes prominent, because enhanced size or color causes other parts of the total form appear to be subdued.

Such use of emphasis or contrast also provides a degree of variety that helps a design avoid monotony. Another way of thinking about emphasis is to draw attention to a particular element (or elements) with the use of an arrow-like shape.

\_\_\_\_\_ *A concern with harmony may be the most useful ingredient of all the virtues in art-making.* Unless the different elements in a total combination are able to live in peace with each other, a feeling of disorder is bound to rule the scene.

If creative people do nothing else, they have to know how important it is to trust their faculties of intuition. Of course, like everything else about art, this requires endless practice.

## ***Art***

Inevitably, when individuals conceive art forms, they integrate feelings, beliefs, attitudes and insights with tangible materials. The forms that emerge give definition to impulses directed from the center of the artist's being.

These internal sensations do not exist in a vacuum. They are given expression by values reflecting customs and traditions that are part of the society in which people find themselves. This helps explain why individuals feel deeply nourished by the power of art.

In a manner that defies simplistic explanation, esthetic forms have a potential for rejuvenating the human soul. The mysterious internal currents that reinforce one's awareness of *being alive* are quickened by contact with art.

In a world where the corrosive effects of constant exposure to noxious advertising messages and political propaganda tend to wear away a person's sensibilities, time spent with art forms often provides a unique measure of relaxed well-being and peaceful

contentment. In addition, as if by magic, contact with art appears to help bring different people closer together when they share art experience across national boundaries.

There is also something remarkable about the way that making art forms frequently provides valuable therapeutic assistance for a creative individual's emotional health. Both making and appreciating art tends to reduce fatigue. In addition, artists have found that nothing else quite equals the profound sense of joyful accomplishment they feel on completion of a given piece of work.

Contact with esthetic form also satisfies the human makeup in other ways. For example, on studying various floral composites in glass by the famous French designer Emile Gallé, viewers have reported experiencing rare degrees of artistic enrichment. Interaction with his creative work has also helped them appreciate nature in marvelous new ways. Identifying with his language of vision has provided a measure of perspective for gaining deep, non-scientific insight into flower forms that the direct observation of growing plants many not otherwise offer.

When students of art history speak of the Medieval Period in Western Civilization, they frequently call attention to the fact that this time was a great "Age of Christian Belief." No evidence of this fact rings true with such force as the sheer number of great buildings that were erected and used as monumental centers of prayer and education. The elaborate façades, sculpture and inspiring interior spaces all sought to instruct the faithful in concepts of spiritual commitment and moral conduct.

The extraordinary beauty and suggestion of welcome, implicit in the cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, continues to speak eloquently to visitors. In fact, many visitors report finding them moved to tears as they step from the entry area into the nave of the church. As they do so, they feel a rush of excitement on seeing chromatic light come through the stained glass windows on either side of the sanctuary.

Concentrating on Michelangelo's uncompromising virtuosity, people can see a heroically scaled treatment in carved marble in his representation of the Biblical David. They cannot help but admire how he joined deep thought with extraordinary powers of visualization to produce a poetic metaphor—one able to express qualities of courage, modesty and faith.

From the same period, Benvenuto Cellini, in his early years an apprentice to Michelangelo was an amazingly versatile artist. During his lifetime, he completed many unusual pieces of work, ranging from designs for jewelry to a saltcellar with mythological figures in gold for the dining table of the French emperor Francis I. He also served two eminent popes, Clement VII and Paul III, as well as many aristocratic figures in various European venues.

Along very different lines, from the 1930s in the United States, architect Frank Lloyd Wright's Kaufmann House is an awesome example of creative ingenuity. Located a relatively short distance from Pittsburgh, in western Pennsylvania, it features an especially unusual balcony cantilevered over a waterfall. Without question, it is one of the most elegant and imaginative examples of residential architecture ever built anywhere. Built of poured concrete, native stone, wood, steel and glass, the building is called *Fallingwater*. In its own remarkable way, it is like a non-denominational hymn in praise of the ability of human beings and the natural environment to live together in a state of grace.

So far, no one has thought about preparing an obituary notice to announce the death of the *will to make art* by human beings. With an endless reservoir of expressive drive, people come along who are determined to convert raw materials into objects, with artistic intensity. The world is infinitely the richer because of their dedication.

Inevitably, we wonder what will come next as artists pursue their work. No one really knows. However, it is safe to assume they will not suddenly stop doing what they have always done.

In time, new forms will emerge. Soon afterward, interested parties will hear about them and go to see how they look. By and by, others will follow. In due course, they will seek what creative personalities, in their own special way, will have brought into the world.