

Arts & Crafts

Wherever people have established communities, handcrafted objects were woven into the fabric of their lives. In early times, most societies drew no distinction between arts and crafts. In fact, many had no word for “art” or “artist” in their language because art was not separate enough from other activities to be recognized as something unique. It was simply a matter of **MAKING THINGS WELL**.

Skilled and creative individuals everywhere have always been drawn to the making and decorating of useful, functional objects. Long-held craft traditions — which served the needs of the community — ensured a supply of objects that sustained and beautified life.



This improved way of making things — a lovelier form — was recognized, shared, and handed on to the next generation. The high quality of handcrafted objects points to a sense of pride and accomplishment, and suggests that the **LOVE OF CREATING/CONSTRUCTING**, the **INSTINCT TOWARD BEAUTY**, and an **INNATE SENSE OF DESIGN** are all universal principles.

Outside Western civilization, craftspeople were generally held in high esteem; their important work, their knowledge of complex and mystifying techniques, their skills, and their deep involvement with natural processes inspired respect.



In many traditional African societies, where the craft of carving was seen as a calling, outstanding carvers were believed to be under the special protection of a god.

Handcrafted objects manifest individual creativity, ingenuity, and the will to excel which comprise our cultural heritage. Crafts take us out of our “mechanized world” and connect us to natural materials and processes. Sometimes the simplistic forms evoke less hurried patterns of life.

Most craft objects were not intended to be works of art. These early creations were pared down, unembellished, and functional — they remind us that **THE FIRST ROLE OF THE ARTS WAS TO HELP PEOPLE SURVIVE**.

Craftspeople recognized the possibilities inherent in **RAW MATERIALS** — they converted them into baskets, pots, looped/twined nets, and even woven fabrics to wear. The objects they made were simple and efficient because — above all else — they had to perform a specific function.



Natural materials speak to the senses, and nowhere can one hear their voices more profoundly than in craft objects.

CRAFTS ARE INTIMATE. They invite you to feel and handle them, use them, and get to know them up close.

Ingenuity, imagination, a sense of play, and the love of beauty have compelled people to invent. But surely, the materials themselves have made some people's fingers itch and inspired them to imagine and create.

THE JOYS OF CREATING CALL UPON MANUAL SKILLS (SOMETIMES PERFECTED OVER A LIFETIME) AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF TECHNIQUES (REFINED OVER GENERATIONS).

A skilled African carver could make a complex piece from a single block of wood. Gold filigree work in India and Europe tested the skills of the craftsman, yet extended the material. Inca masons constructed massive walls using enormous stones carved so precisely that a fingernail cannot fit in the grooves!



Native American cultures placed a high value on such domestic skills as weaving, basket making, pottery, and decorative work in beads and paint. Basket making involved selecting the grasses in season, preparing them over a period of time, and eventually the construction itself. (Some grasses required a year's drying



time — so a quality basket could take up to two months to construct!) Native Americans also developed a method of steaming wood so it could be bent and shaped. Bent wooden frames were used for snowshoes, and inch-thick slabs of wood were folded to form storage containers.

Along with the developed technical skills, conscious aesthetic judgments also went into the making of objects. The craftsman simply asked, "What looks good?" These judgments become apparent when we look at the form or the design of the objects, as well as their decoration.

Designs were made for various reasons. They frequently had symbolic meanings, and referred to the gods, certain myths, or histories of the society. Designs could heal and protect, or give special powers in love and war. They often contained precise messages, encoded in realistic or abstract imagery. In non-literate societies, the designs and images often functioned as pictorial languages.

Craftspeople today may work outside the constraints of tradition if they choose; they might ignore the requirements of function, the restrictions of the material, the mandates of history.

Although mass production has displaced crafts for their traditional meaning, it has ensured their perpetration in the hands of individuals for whom craft work is an act of love. Many craftspeople today produce functional objects — though these, too, might move into the area of fine arts.

CRAFT FAIRS — which provide a place to meet the artists as well as view the crafts — have become immensely popular in recent years. The revival of the need for crafts in our culture today may reflect a desire and need to humanize our environment and our lives.



What separates the craft object from the art object? What may help distinguish the difference is the emphasis on certain materials. Along with the ones previously mentioned, the traditional materials of the crafts are clay, glass, metal, wood, and fibers.

Most craft artists concentrate on one material only and have learned to realize its potential for many different kinds of expression. Each of these materials has its own capabilities and limitations, and each lends itself to certain kinds of structural and decorative possibilities.

Established artists have often reached out to apply their talents for visual expression and organization to crafts. For example, most people are surprised to learn that **LEONARDO DA VINCI** — in addition to painting — designed costumes and scenery for elaborate theatrical productions. Another Renaissance artist, **RAPHAEL**, drew designs for tapestries. During the 20th century, **PICASSO** designed and decorated pottery; the sculptor, **ALEXANDER CALDER**, made jewelry; and **MATISSE** designed stained glass windows and rugs.

