

# Crafting a Movement

By ROSEMARY KNOWER

When first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton invited the press and the American people to see the astonishing diversity of the White House Collection of American Crafts last year, the reaction was universal enthusiasm.

Seventy-six contemporary crafts artists, working in glass, fiber, metal, wood and clay, had created 72 masterworks for the show. Scattered throughout the public and private rooms of the First Residence, set like jewels on tables, on sideboards, under portraits, they looked perfectly at home with the Chippendale and Duncan Phyfe furniture. Naturally. Although those 72 pieces were modern in feeling and design, they were tributes, too — to the unbroken line of artists who have made beautiful things to be used stretching back to prehistory.

1600 Pennsylvania Ave. isn't the only address that's showing off American crafts. Take a look at all those perfect rooms in *Metropolitan Home*, *Country Living* and *Architectural Digest*. Interior designers, ar-

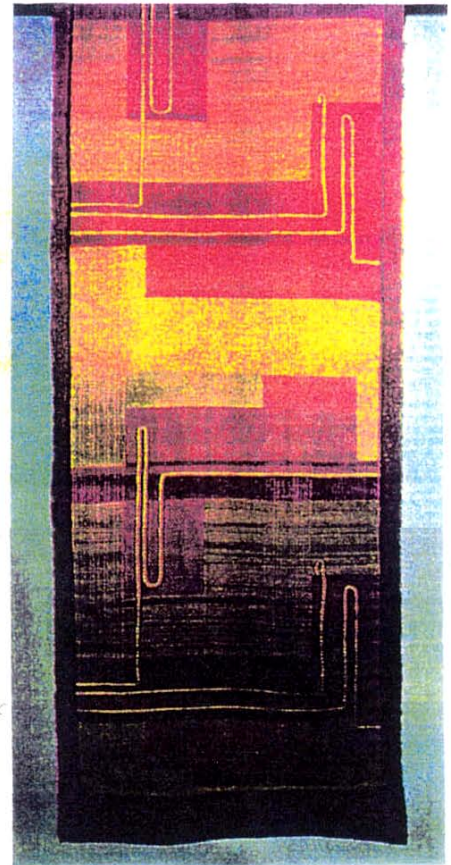
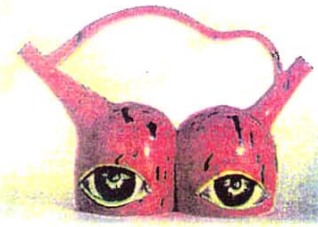
chitects and ordinary people are combing museum shops, crafts fairs and galleries in pursuit of that special piece that will make a house a home and an office a showplace.

They fall in love with the ordinary objects of everyday living transformed by the artisan's imagination. They want to take those handcrafted wood cabinets, glass panels, ceramic platters and fiber hangings home, and live with them. The contemporary crafts movement has prompted a passionate union between the maker and the user.

That's the view of Barbara Tober, incoming board chairman of the American Craft Museum in New York. "The artist's hands are there to invest daily life with beauty and pleasure in the work for everyone who uses these things," she says. "Sunday, I served salad in bowls by Wendy Williams and Patrick Dougherty, two contemporary crafts artists. People were charmed. 'Look at those faces!' they'd say. 'Where did you get that?' I love the idea that the artists create these pieces to be used. It's not vitrines full of artwork. It's alive for every day."

Ms. Tober has been collecting since the early '70s, and has seen the crafts market steadily improve in quality and prestige. In the beginning, there

The market for handmade objects is steadily growing as buyers seek beauty and function



Items from "Craft in the Machine Age: 1920-1945": top, Michael Lucero's "Double Chamber Stirrup Pot," 1995; above, Frederick Carder's "Six Prong Green Jade Vase," circa 1930; right, Dorothy Wright Liebes' "Wall Hanging," 1936.

## Crafts, Here and There

Here are some good sources for seeing and buying contemporary crafts.

• **The American Craft Museum**, 40 W. 53rd St., New York, will present the White House Collection of American Crafts from Dec. 8, 1995, to Feb. 25, 1996, and the "Craft in the Machine Age: 1920-1945" show from Oct. 19, 1995, to Feb. 25, 1996. The museum's gift shop carries one-of-a-kind and limited production pieces in all price ranges.

• **The American Craft Council's Baltimore Fair** will take place at the Convention Center from Feb. 27 to March 3, 1996, and feature 750 contemporary artists selling works of fiber, metal, ceramics, glass and wood.

• **The Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art**, Pennsylvania Avenue and 17th Street, N.W., Washington, maintains a full exhibition schedule of crafts artists throughout the year, and sponsors gallery talks and meet-the-artist evenings. Its gift shop carries a small selection of contemporary works.

• **Savage Mill**, in Savage, about 15 minutes south of Baltimore (Exit 38A off Interstate 95), is open every day. Artists there work in open studio-shops, and galleries show works in clay, fiber, wood, glass and metal by artists from all over the country.

• **The Tomlinson Craft Collection**, in the Rotunda and at Towson Commons, carries a variety of works in all price ranges. The management will arrange contact with an artist if you want to commission a piece.

• **The American Craft Council**, 72 Spring St., New York, N.Y. 10012-4019, maintains a national Registry of Craft Artists by name, location, medium, process and product. Each file contains photographic images of the artist's work, as well as exhibition catalogs and reviews. The library is open 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays to Fridays. Nonmembers may use the library for \$5 per visit. Anyone may join the Craft Council for \$40 annually. Membership gives you six issues of *American Craft* magazine, access to the library, and free admission on public days to American Craft Council fairs, such as the one in Baltimore.

— Rosemary Knower

were few galleries and fewer museums willing to display American crafts, she says. Now there is no dearth of shows, and the work of crafts artists is bringing big sale prices at the auction houses.

Ginny Tomlinson, owner of the Tomlinson Craft Collection, the venerable Baltimore crafts shop, has noted the latter trend:

"The Robert Levin cups that I originally sold for \$200 are bringing prices over \$2,000 at Sotheby's. The pieces have become more sophisticated, as the artist has responded to the consumer. They're doing things with glass in this country — new techniques with old materials — that have brought about a complete revival of interest in the possibilities of the medium."

Like Ms. Tober, Ms. Tomlinson has seen the market for fine crafts grow over the last 20 years. "More artists are able to support themselves," she says. "And there are gallery and museum shows all over, now."

How does she select pieces for display and sale? "I want people to be able to collect at any level, so we have lots of things that are appropriate for wedding presents. My idea has always been, 'Why buy something machine-made, when you can have something

unique, stamped with the artist's personality?' I recently went to a dinner party where the young couple had set up the casserole as a work of art. Why not?"

Ms. Tober agrees. "For centuries, only the very wealthy could afford to commission and collect. Today, the nurturers of the crafts artist are the ordinary people who choose to surround themselves with unique pieces. They fall in love with the artist's vision and skill, and they want to have it where they can touch it, use it."

But where can you go if you want to commission a piece to fit that odd corner, or buy a present to celebrate a golden wedding anniversary? Savage Mill, where you can see the artists at work, talk to them, tell them your ideas, and settle on a piece that's yours alone, is a good place to start. Housed in an old spinning mill just south of Baltimore are studios, workshops and galleries for contemporary crafts, as well as antique stores that carry, among other things, artisan's work from days gone by.

Jerome Louison, who works hardwoods into the beautiful commissioned furniture pieces that surround him in the Louison Woodworks studio and shop, is typical of the contem-



From "Craft in the Machine Age: 1920-1945," Viktor Schreckengost's earthenware "Jazz Bowl," 1931.



Sand-etched glass "Mimbres Table," 1993, by Jim Richards and Alan Ernstein, at Savage Mill.

porary craftsmen working at Savage Mill. He began working in wood during his stint in the Navy. He had only a few tools and the idea of letting the wood tell him what it wanted to be. Now he is a skilled artisan whose natural-edge library table, sleekly shaped and subtly finished to bring out the grain and color of the wood, is worthy of heirloom status and sells for about \$2,000. "I think I

was always a woodworker in my heart," he says.

Alan Ernstein, over at the Glass Edge, has the same love of material, but works in sandblasted and etched glass. In his studio-shop, you can see a wrought-iron table with a heavy glass top designed like a section of a redwood tree and etched with a desert lizard, (about \$500). Or you can buy a window panel sandblasted with a trompe l'oeil scene to shut out the neighbors next door (about \$400 for an 18-by-24-inch panel). If you don't see what you want, Mr. Ernstein will talk to you about how to commission it.

That love of a new project is typical of today's artisans. Many do retro as well as contemporary work, slipping from deco to nouveau with an astonishing facility.

This diversity of styles is what you'll find at the American Craft Council's yearly Baltimore Fair. In February, 750 artists from all over the country, showing in every imaginable medium, will descend on the Convention Center. If you're interested in sitting, eating from, hanging or wearing contemporary crafts work, this is the place to get an idea of what's out there. The Baltimore Fair did a retail business of about \$4.7 million this year

— that's from ordinary walk-in-and-buy people who are taking home works of art for their homes and offices, from paperweights and bentwood rockers to turned-wood bowls and fiber hangings.

If you go to the fair, you'll be browsing alongside people connected to the rich and famous. The show is also shopped by buyers from the likes of the Bergdorf Goodman and Neiman Marcus department stores, gallery dealers and interior designers.

All this upscale interest means major exhibits on American crafts have become trendsetters for home-furnishing producers. If you want to be in on next year's vogue, the best place to start looking is back — at the retrospectives. Designs featured in shows such as the American Craft Museum's "Craft in the Machine Age: 1920-1945" (opening Oct. 19 in New York) are likely to show up as influences on contemporary crafts artists, as well as on the new furniture and accessory lines by major mass-production companies at the High Point, N.C., and Milan, Italy, shows.

American Craft Museum senior curator Kate Carmel, who has been working with the

"Craft in the Machine Age" show, believes it illustrates the first real use of trained craftsmen applying their skills to mass production. Their goal, she says, was to give the common man good design from honest materials.

The artists in the show were the brains and heart behind American art deco and the famous "Century of Progress" exhibit in Chicago in 1933-1934. They left their mark on an era, in the designs for Radio City Music Hall, Busby Berkeley movies, streamlined furniture and chic accessories. And those designs did filter down to the common man, just as they had hoped.

Stroll into the galleries, the crafts studios, the fairs, and you'll see that artists are still working in this tradition of fine design implemented by skilled hand work. When next you look at your living room with the speculative glint that means, "How can I change this?" consider how it might be transformed by a partnership: you and the crafts artist.

Chances are, as you hunt for the perfect expression of what you want, there's an artist making the very thing. When you see it, you'll love it, and first thing you know, you'll be living with art.



"Vitrine," 1994, a tigertail maple and beveled glass table by Jerome Louison of Louison Woodworks.