

The fine art of crafts

By [April Austin](#), Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor / February 16, 2007
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Who knew that knitting could rate right up there with painting and sculpture? In the hands of contemporary artists, the humble craft has moved from state fair competitions and baby blankets to cutting-edge status. As young artists freely adapt the techniques of knitting and weaving into their work, a shift is occurring in what people consider fine art.

Crafts have long played second fiddle to painting and sculpture, at least as far as museums were concerned. "Crafts" have always had domestic connotations. Now, a landmark exhibition here at the Museum of Arts and Design explodes that homey image, and lays to rest the notion of crafts as inferior to the fine arts.

"Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting" brings together 27 artists from eight countries to stretch the definitions of fiber and scale. The work on display ranges from micro-knit sweaters to room-size installations of rope, elastic, wire, and rubber, and tackles issues as varied as war, global politics, and gender roles.

Contemporary art, with its everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach, has played a huge role in blurring the line between "crafts," which traditionally meant folk art that did not require formal training, and "fine arts," which implied a more academic background.

"More often, you find a crossover, with artists who knit and knitters who have fine-arts backgrounds," says artist Sabrina Gschwandtner.

American crafts have a noble history as collectibles; think of Shaker furniture collected by such celebrities as Oprah Winfrey. Record prices have been paid at auction for antique quilts, jewelry, and ceramics. "The craft tradition in the US is stronger than in Europe," says Shane Waltener, a Brussels-born, London-based artist. "Craft has quite a bad image, particularly in Europe. There's still a prejudice against it."

That bias can be traced directly to craft's utilitarian role in the home. Generations of women raised families and applied their creativity to domestic tasks, but the road was much harder for women who wanted to become serious artists.

In the early 20th century, as small numbers of women tried to enter academies, they found obstacles at every turn. Today, women artists may comment on gender bias in their work, but they don't carry the same baggage as their predecessors, says David Revere McFadden, the exhibition curator.

An excellent example is "Filigree Car Bombing," in which the rusted body of a salvaged automobile is pierced with a network of delicate tracings, like henna patterns on an Indian bride's skin. Artist Cal Lane used a welder's torch to cut patterns into the metal, creating a lacy design. The lace calls to mind femininity and seduction, but with an industrial edge. Ms. Lane tweaks the viewer's preconception that only men use welding tools. Perhaps she is also commenting on the steeliness that lies underneath a woman's outward appearance.

Carson Fox's wall hanging was inspired by the mourning jewelry that Victorian women wove from their own hair. "Hair Filigree #3" causes the viewer to do a double take. Is it real hair? The strands are actually wire, but the connotation is very personal. "This was a medium where women expressed themselves creatively, their frustrations and potentially their unhappiness were drawn into the lines of the lace," Ms. Fox writes of the hair jewelry.

Artists today readily integrate elements of craft into their work in a manner that would have been anathema to women who came of age in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, at the height of Abstract Expressionism. Who could imagine a painter of Helen Frankenthaler's caliber picking up knitting needles or deconstructing carpet?

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In the 1970s, as more women throughout society were entering the workforce, either by necessity or by choice, few had the time or inclination to pursue traditional domestic arts. "It skipped a generation," says Ms. Gschwandtner, a young New York artist, who explains that she and others relied on their grandmothers to teach them knitting. Now, despite the frantic pace of modern life, handicrafts have staged a renaissance.

Male artists, too, now feel freer to explore tactile art, especially when they can exploit materials such as underwear elastic (Mr. Waltener's "A World Wide Web"), or cutup dollar bills and lead ribbon (Dave Cole's "The Money Dress," and "Lead Teddy Bear"), or fiber optics (Niels van Eijk's "Bobbin Lace Lamp"). With the infusion of technology, both women and men have become adept at pushing boundaries. The men selected for this show, in particular, appear to prefer tech-intensive projects, using everything from strands of glass and fused layers of porcelain to wrapped wire and laminated fabric.

Visitors to the exhibition may not be aware of the finer points of the craft-versus-fine-art debate, but they do respond to the sheer inventiveness of the art. The show is also remarkable because of its accessibility – the basic technique of weaving or knitting is familiar to anyone who's worn a sweater or made a potholder in preschool. A viewer isn't separated from the art in this show by centuries of scholarship or criticism as is common with painting.

The excitement comes from seeing how these familiar techniques are reinterpreted in startling or amusing ways. For example, most people remember crocheted doilies that adorned furniture in our grandmothers' day. Using that same technique, Iceland artist Hildur Bjarnadóttir created a table cover ringed with 4-inch-tall crocheted skulls, giving a playful, macabre sensibility to an otherwise placid art form.

Gschwandtner and others also tap into the communal aspects of knitting. For the run of the show, she has signed up volunteers to take part in a knitting circle. Museum visitors can join the circle and work on such projects as helping to knit squares that will be joined to make blankets for recovering US soldiers. The circle becomes a community in real time, and the knitters' impressions are recorded in a book. Gschwandtner describes the experience of a retired construction worker who joined the circle while his wife beamed over his shoulder. She later wrote, "My husband learned to knit after 30 years of watching me! The show inspired him to try it!"

Waltener, who has organized similar circles in London, likes the idea of slowing viewers down by getting them to participate. "There is a formal way to go to an exhibition," he says. "You go in, look at paintings, sit in the cafe, and buy the catalog on the way out." But if the visitor is drawn into a knitting circle, "you break that pattern," he says.

"Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting" goes a long way toward overcoming the bias against craft by showing a rough and tumble side. Still, the ubiquitous nature of crafts, and the ease with which the skills are learned, is both a blessing and a curse: People require less background to enjoy the work, but at the same time, they tend to take it more for granted.

"Craft's greatest strength is also its greatest weakness," says Gschwandtner. "It can be utilitarian in a way that painting never can be."

- *"Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting" continues through June 17.*