

**The fine art of crafts**

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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?