

Crafting Modernism: Midcentury American Art and Design

October 12, 2011 – January 15, 2012

Museum of Arts and Design, New York

Reviewed by Damian Skinner



Crafting Modernism is an exhibition with major ambitions. The fourth in a series of shows organized by the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York as part of their History of Twentieth-Century American Craft: The Centenary Project, this exhibition explores the role of the handcrafted object in the period 1945 to 1969. It is a great story, which not only takes in the heyday of studio craft, but encompasses a period when craft – on the back of a wider fascination with the handmade – was a real player in many forms of modernism unfolding in America. According to co-curator Jeannine Falino, writing in the catalog, ‘The most significant development explored in this exhibition is the arrival of the crafted object as an aspect of modern art.’ This is a big claim and one the exhibition doesn’t always come to terms with.



The exhibition begins, on the fifth floor, with the 1940s and unfolds with due regard to environments. There are, for example, displays intended to evoke the retail stores of companies like Herman Miller, whose Textiles and Objects store opened in New York City in 1961, bringing together textiles (Alexander Girard, Lili Blumenau) and furniture (George Nelson, Sam Maloof) and demonstrating how important the domestic environment was as an arena in which modernism in its widest sense (not just modernist art) fought its battles. Another display called ‘Craft in the Modern Interior’ refers to the post-Second World War boom in handmade objects in domestic spaces, ‘giving a sense of individual style to American homes that were often in new cookie-cutter suburbs.’ Here a textile panel by Ted Hallman hangs alongside a chair by Evert Sodergren, a coffee table by George Nakashima, a side table by Edward Wormley, a sculpture by Isamu Noguchi and a sculptural relief by Earl Pardon.

While valuable as a gesture beyond the museum, to what we might call the daily life of modernism, these displays are also in a sense lifeless, too much the museum and not enough the shop floor or lounge. In the reconstruction of Textiles and Objects, the objects are lined up and spaced apart in a way that is all about the white cube and not much about the commercial retail space. Similarly, the modern interior evoked here lacks substance. I was left with the question, would such objects actually ever come together? Which is another way of asking about economics and taste – how rich would you need to be to own all of these? Would they actually be found together in a room? In a cookie-cutter suburban house, a fabulous case-study house, or a modernist apartment in New York? The museum acknowledges the domestic quality of modernism – its location in the living room, the everyday – but then undercuts its emphasis on this character by not taking its critique seriously and turning the objects into tastefully displayed applied arts.



Ramona Solberg, *Shaman's Necklace*
Photo: John Bigelow Taylor



Mosher Zabari, *Torah crown*
Photo: Courtesy Jewish Museum New York

There are aesthetic categories on the fifth floor, too. ‘Religion, spirituality, and symbolism’ addresses religious institutional patronage for craftspeople, and the way that others used religious or symbolic subjects and motifs, including references to indigenous art. This is a bit confused, since primitivism (the adoption of indigenous art in western art) is not driven by the same agendas as making a Torah crown. In one case, a glass angel sculpture by Edris Eckhardt sits next to a cruet and chalice by John C Marshall, *Shaman's Necklace* by Ramona Solberg, a sculpture by Richard Pousette-Dart and a Torah crown by Mosher Zabari. Solberg’s necklace is not religious in anywhere near the same way as the Torah crown or the chalice. It is not an object for use in religious ceremonies by a shaman, but instead an example of modernist primitivism, referring to the power of jewelry – charms and amulets. The primitivism of the ceramics (Robert Sperry) or fabric (Jim Kaneke) is only spiritual in the most general sense. As the wall text puts it, ‘In the hands of these artists, crafted objects, already imbued with the human touch, become carriers of the human spirit.’ This is very general and risks losing any sense of the historicity of these objects, the various forces that shaped their production and their reception. Primitivism, for example, is not about the human spirit, but a response to a set of artistic and social questions that gave it a specific utility in the 1940s and 1950s.

The other aesthetic category is ‘Biomorphism,’ which, according to the wall text, ‘is typified by undulating lines and curved forms that mimic nature and the human body.’ Biomorphism started in art, we are told, and then moved to craft and design. This feels somewhat cursory. Nine objects (one painting, one textile, two items of furniture and five ceramics) are used to explore this theme, which was a major movement at the time.



The other categories on the fifth floor are ‘Woodworkers,’ ‘The Design Firms,’ ‘Collaboration with Industry,’ ‘Craft in Production,’ ‘The Handmade Look,’ ‘Craft in the Modern Interior,’ ‘Crossover in Art, Craft and Design’ and finally ‘Jewelry and Enamel in the 1940s and 50s.’ Some of these thematic displays are excellent. ‘The Handmade Look’ deals with the appropriation of signs of craft in industrial design, and raises all manner of interesting ideas about how the crafts could fit into the modernist interior. There is no problem imagining that anything from ‘Craft in the Modern Interior’ could go with anything from ‘The Handmade Look.’ Which does point out something interesting about this exhibition – that as you move around the galleries, you begin to get a sense of wider aesthetics, the look, the style and the issues of an entire postwar period.

‘Jewelry and Enamel in the 1940s and 50s’ contains about fourteen pieces of jewelry, almost all of them in two wall cases. The introductory text isn’t particularly interesting, more sociological in flavor than suggesting what is at stake in jewelry of this period, or exactly how this jewelry is modernist. (It talks about artists making jewelry, the dates and names of those who did, and others who were jewelers exclusively.) In one case is work by Bertioia, Cooke, De Patta, deFeo, Wiener, Wilson, Ziegfeld. It is linked by its interest in space, often using wire, a kind of general aesthetic of abstraction or biomorphism, and the predominance of silver. John Paul Miller has a scarab necklace in its own case, with no information about how it is modernist, and then there is a third case with Craver, Falkenstein, Kramer, Smith and Calder in it. This is more powerfully a case of jewelry connecting with art – especially surrealism. But through all this, there is nothing about precisely what the modernism of jewelry might be.

And overall, there is little about what modernism is in anything other than a stylistic sense. Here's what I could pick up in the absence of a text specifically addressing this issue: undulating lines and curved forms that mimic nature (biomorphism); the human spirit and spirituality; overt signs of the handmade; natural materials, irregular textures, forms, colors; production and industrial processes; 'Simple, traditional forms that brought out the natural beauty of the wood' (from the 'Woodworkers' wall text). We are told that modernism was made 'warm and livable through the use of natural materials such as ceramics and wood, and the incorporation of simple, often playful motifs,' in a wall text from 'The Design Firms.' This modernism is also strangely untethered from history. There is no mention of what comes before, nothing about the Arts and Crafts movement, for example, or the earlier kinds of modernism (the International Style, the Bauhaus) that the mid-century modernists in America were developing in their flirtation with craft.



Indeed, moving through the galleries, it begins to feel to me as if the exhibition is trapped: the objects aren't art enough to be treated totally as autonomous artworks (and thus lined up as exemplars of the various 'isms' that form the roll call of modernism), and there is no interest (from the museum, or the makers, who want to be cultural players) to have them be released as craft and design. It is as if MAD knows this isn't really art, but is too ambivalent about what this means to set these objects free. Treated like this, modernist craft becomes a poor version of the art that you would otherwise see if you went to MoMA. (The actual art in *Crafting Modernism* makes this point too, being examples of lesser works by major figures.)



Sam Maloof, *Cradle Cabinet*
Photo: Eva Heyd



Richard Artschwager, *Description of Table New York*
Photo: Steven Sloman

The fourth floor pushes the story forward in time, into the 1950s and 1960s. Interestingly, this part of the exhibition helps make clear the split that I could sense beginning to develop on the fifth floor, the point where art, design and craft go their separate ways. It happens in the section called ‘Craft is Art is Craft,’ which is supposed to show how artists started exploring the sculptural qualities of their media. Sam Maloof’s cradle cabinet makes the split totally clear when compared with the objects by Lucas Samaras and Richard Artschwager, neither of whom are interested in craft – which means neither wish to fetishise their materials or skills in the way that craft does. While they are using plywood, laminates, wool, etc, this isn’t craft: it is sculpture. James Melchert’s *Leg Pot I* (stoneware, lead, cloth) or Ka Kwang Hui’s *Form* (earthenware) aren’t focused on the materials from which they are made. The exhibition literally splits down the middle – craft on the left, and art on the right. While the wall text insists on using headlines like ‘Blurring the Boundaries’, the work shows anything but that actually happening. The Voulkos works still hover around craft, but are moving somewhere interesting, but Oldenberg’s *Giant BLT* has nothing in common with Trude Guermanprez’s *Banner*, which is craft. Walk back to the left side of the gallery, and it is stunningly clear that what you see is craft – not art, even if some of the potters are working in a large scale. The references are entirely different, the material means something, the history of the practice is still in play, the aesthetic is totally modernist – organic, abstraction, nothing like where the art on the other side is going. I’ve never seen this issue so clearly delineated before. It is a revelation, although not one the exhibition intends you to experience.



Claus Oldenberg, *Giant BLT*
Photo: Ellen Page Wilson



Trude Guermanprez, *Banner*
Photo: Eva Heyd

Whereas all the objects on the fifth floor belonged to the same world, the same space, the same domestic environment and the same time period, suddenly these objects – the crafts – seem like they don't belong anymore. Craft seems out of time, or periodicized in a way that the art side isn't. The label says that *Falling Blue* by Harvey Littleton 'celebrates the sculptural as well as translucent possibilities of the medium,' yet the actual sculptures around it show that there is nothing sculptural about it at all – or nothing sculptural in the sense of contemporary sculpture practice in the 1960s. Thomas Lynn's chair 'straddles the sculptural and the functional,' but only if sculptural means immediately postwar. Indeed, craft is only rescued from this ghetto by the display called 'Surrealism and Humor' (Ken Cory's *Tongue*) and in the 'California Funk' section. Here craft gets to be connected to its moment, exploring issues and aesthetics that have some urgency. Notably none, or very little, of this work is about materials or skills. Rather, those things are used in service of bigger issues.





Stanley Lechtzin, *Pendant 4C*
Photo: Eva Heyd



Fred Woell, *The Good guys*
Photo: Eva Heyd

On the left (craft) side of the gallery, there is a section called ‘Jewelry in the 1960s,’ which is actually all about technical developments – lostwax casting which was revived that decade and then electrochemistry. This work, by jewelers such as Paley, Watson, Winston, Lechtzin, is positioned in terms of how it is made, not in terms of its connections to the wider world. In a sense, craft is severed from time and history. Something very different happens on the right (art) side of the gallery. The jewelry here is featured in a section called ‘Voices of Protest,’ suggesting William Clarke’s *Police State* badge is about the Vietnam War, or J Fred Woell’s *The Good Guys* is a turning away from failed or dead heroes, such as John F Kennedy or Martin Luther King. Garry Knox Bennett’s *Little Flower Pipe* (1968) is fabulous, a perfect conjunction of craft and social desires.



The catalog that accompanies *Crafting Modernism* is a solid effort. Nicely illustrated, the essays by various authors unfold as a series of overlapping investigations that enrich your sense of the period and the issues at stake. Jeannine Falino's introduction is followed by Glenn Adamson's contextual account of American craft infrastructure, which is followed by Lowery Stoke Sims's tracking of the boundaries and border crossings between art, craft and design, followed by Donald Albrecht's account of handmade traces in industrial design and environments as diverse as the domestic lounge, restaurants, civic spaces and popular lifestyle magazines, followed by Jennifer Scanlan's essay looking at the relationship between craft and industry, and finally Caroline M Hannah on the markets for craft. But this isn't all, as another six essays – by Elissa Auther (fiber) Ulysses Grant Dietz (ceramics) Bruce Metcalf (silversmithing) Ursula Ilse-Neuman (jewelry) David L Barquist (wood) and Patricia Failing (glass) – survey individual craft media in the period. All this analysis is accompanied by the usual scholarly apparatus, such as bibliographies and biographies (extending to information about institutions and companies, as well as makers) and done here to a high standard. While not all the essays are equally good and it does seem somewhat reactionary – against the spirit of the modernism it surveys – to organize half of the publication according to craft media, the whole does provide a sense of the ideologies and varieties of modernism that made up craft practice in the period 1945-1969.

The catalog works hard to assert the claim that art and craft dissolved into one another, which is probably the issue I would most disagree with, especially after seeing the exhibition. On the evidence, craft and art, by the late 1960s, had turned into two very different things and this happened despite the rich interaction at the heart of modernism in the 1940s and 1950s. Falino's claim that the crafted object arrived as an aspect of modern art is disputed by the exhibition she

has co-curated – not at the level of individuals, many of whom do actually complicate the relationship, but at the level of infrastructure or practice. Glenn Adamson gets it right when he writes in his essay that ‘The history of the movement’s institutionalization, therefore, serves as both an inspiration and a cautionary tale.’ In hindsight, quite a bit was lost when craft became constituted as a single field (as Adamson puts it).

In her essay Falino writes that ‘Long subservient to an artificial hierarchy of the arts that had been established in the renaissance, the handmade object underwent a paradigm shift in the postwar period to become an assertive form of artistic expression.’ She’s right, but what has been achieved by the end of the 1960s is not craft attaining the rarefied heights of art, but something that, ultimately, seems a more ambivalent achievement. What *Crafting Modernism* demonstrates, at least for me, is that the crafting of modernism was not quite a success. Certainly, if craft was a player in the 1940s and 1950s, this exhibition demonstrates precisely why that wasn’t true by the end of the 1960s.



On final reflection, I wonder if what *Crafting Modernism* opens up is the possibility that we can no longer clearly see the role of craft in the postwar period, since we always impose a cluster of issues from the present (is craft art or not?) onto the evidence of the past. Much of this exhibition suggests that craft and its relation to art and design is our problem, not a concern endemic to the postwar period. They didn’t worry about it, but we do – and in our worry we impose a certain awkward framework onto the period itself, which makes us less able to see what’s going on. Craft was not, in the 1940s, a kind of backwater practice. To be a craftsman was to be right in the centre of the action, at the heart of modernist experiments. If we accept that is true, then *Crafting Modernism* becomes a project that, in asking the questions it does, becomes less alert to the lessons that modernism might offer to our understanding of craft and its possibilities in the twentieth century.