


# american craft

Expanding the  
Craft Toolbox:  
Old Meets New

Many Cultures  
Converge in  
South Africa's  
Cape Town



**Michael Sherrill**  
Natural Narratives in  
Clay, Metal and Glass

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# american craft

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Right:  
Cristiano Bianchin  
*Urna (Urn)*, 2007,  
hand-blown, ground  
and polished glass,  
crocheted synthetic  
thread, steel, 18 x 8 in.  
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*Expanding  
the Toolbox*

What has the digital done to traditional craft education? Jo Lauria visits three leading art schools to observe the new "tools of creativity" for those committed to the design and making of objects; she discovers that the digital is not necessarily the enemy of the hand.

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*"How do I draw with small pieces of porcelain? Metal becomes the backbone for a line or an idea that I want to express."*

—*Michael Sherrill*

On the cover (detail) and below:  
**Michael Sherrill**  
*Sea Flower*,  
*Julesterium*, 2008,  
silica bronze,  
Moretti glass,  
mokume porcelain,  
43 x 20 x 11 1/2 in.



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Otis College of Art and Design



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# Expanding the Toolbox



STORY BY  
Jo Lauria

Can the hand coexist with the digital in the education of future makers and designers? Students at three leading American art colleges find out as they learn the tools of their trade.

There is a lament often voiced at craft conferences that the younger generation is losing its hand skills to the computer. The implication is that the craft arts will wither and die on the vine because the new generation of artists lack the techniques required to create well-crafted objects. Seduced by the computer, these up-and-comers will have traded their hand skills for digital programs that allegedly do the “handwork” for them.

Does this lament have substance? The answer could only be obtained by going to the source—art colleges—and posing questions: what kind of tools are the students learning to prepare them for their professions in the arts? Is the computer an integral tool to be mastered for creative production? Does the “tool set” include learning craftsmanship?

Visiting Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia; Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles; and Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, schools with which I’ve had some connection, I was able to observe the learning from the trenches. Through talks with students and faculty, I explored the process by which art students connected to faculty who impart the necessary skill sets. I found the new “tools of creativity” to be a revelation. ▶

## Tools for the Postindustrial World

Left to right: Student in the tool room; Associate Professor Daniella Kerner overseeing the casting process; Professor Stanley Lechtzin with student retrieving resin print from Objet 3-D printer. Opposite: Majors studio.



A university level craft program where the computer claims a prominent position is the Metals/Jewelry/CAD-CAM department at Tyler School of Art—indeed, Computer-Aided Design and Computer-Aided Manufacturing is part of its title. Stanley Lechtzin, a professor in the department since 1962, has been its guiding spirit, leading the students and other department faculty into the digital world. Lechtzin was first introduced to the computer in 1962 during a visit to the Burroughs Corporation main frame facility in Detroit. In the mid-to-late 1970s, when personal computers began to show up on the shelves of electronic stores, Lechtzin bought a Radio Shack TRS80-Model 1.

Excited by the potential application of this emerging technology to the metals/jewelry discipline, Lechtzin received a grant to install 20 Apple IIe computers in a computer lab on campus. “I started using advanced technologies at Tyler in 1984 and I was the first to bring computers into the studio,” recalls Lechtzin. “I encouraged students to use the computer for designing jewelry for bench work and to make presentation drawings and renderings of designs for clients.”

The current metals/jewelry curriculum at Tyler emphasizes digital 3-D modeling programs and computer applications used

in the production of 3-D objects. Students begin jewelry classes as sophomores, and as metals/jewelry majors they are required to take two computer courses in their junior and senior year. Lechtzin has found that “by and large, students are averse to computers. But they soon get over the hurdle and accelerate their learning curve.”

Once they’ve mastered the digital language, the students have access to the studio’s two 3-D printers—one that prints in plaster or starch, and the other an Objet printer that can print in 13 different resins and can use the CNC machine (computer numerical milling machine), laser cutters and a laser welder. Lechtzin believes that “CAD-CAM/RP (Rapid Prototyping) is a new and original medium for exploration: It offers students the opportunity to operate in a postindustrial, high-tech digital world.” But don’t make the mistake of asking Lechtzin if the computer is the newest tool in his professional toolbox; he bristles at this assessment and asserts: “CAD-CAM/RP are not just tools; they are more than tools. They comprise a *medium*, because the computer and the 3-D printer provide the materials *and* the tools to manipulate materials.”

There’s a place for hand tools as well in the curriculum and the studio. Tyler has a room fully stocked with the traditional





Opposite bottom:  
**Shea Webber**  
*Bambi Brooch*, found object, sterling silver, gold leaf, hand fabricated.

Top:  
**Rebecca Annand**  
*Cameo II*, brooch, resin, CAD modeled, 3-D print.

Top right:  
**Michelle Beaulieu**  
*Vacuums Bacteria*, neckpiece, silver, lint, resin, spray paint, hand fabricated.



hand tools for metalwork. And the main studio is equipped with 24 jeweler's benches. The intro sophomore course is where students learn to work with materials, tools and technical processes, explains associate professor Daniella Kerner "Projects include designing a ring: the students use hand tools, make the model, then cast it. They learn all the traditional processes of working with metals and other materials to make jewelry and objects working at the bench," Kerner observes. "Students fall in love with hand fabrication."

The computer and the hand are not in competition but in collaboration, Lechtzin believes. "Without experience of materials, processes, hand tools and hand manipulation, students lack the experience necessary to be good designers using computer programs, as they don't have the 'feel' and the knowledge of how a jewelry piece is made." Thus, the hand empowers the computer in many ways beyond the obvious tap-tap-tapping on the keyboard. "The whole world is digital and it is essential that students today have the ability to work comfortably in the 2-D and 3-D digital environment," asserts Lechtzin. "Adding technology to the program brings craft into the current century and prepares for the future without giving up any traditional craft practices." >



## Old-School Tools and New Technologies

### Otis College of Art and Design



Bottom: **Shaun Redsar** *Zygo Teapot*. This junior teapot project reflects the theme of bones. The model was designed using a CAD software

program and rapid prototype technology to create the white bone-like pieces and assembly. The metal ball in the center was a found object.



Left and right: Aida Klein, Otis model shop manager, loads a sheet of MDF to laser-cut a template and discusses laser-cutting perforations in neoprene. Middle: Welding metal. Opposite: Cutting wood with large saw

If you're looking for a crafts track at Otis College of Art and Design you won't find it in the college catalog. The Product Design department seems to be the place where students learn traditional skills of working with wood, metal, ceramics, plastics and fabrics along with the digital skills required to keep current with emerging technologies. "Students in product design use technology, but they are not technicians or engineers," remarks founding chair Steve McAdam. "They are creators, artists and makers who thrive on diversity and engaging in design challenges."

One course for product design majors was for a cremation urn, team-taught by Joan Takayama-Ogawa and Randall Wilson. The course was sponsored by Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary, Los Angeles, a Jewish cemetery known as the final resting place of many entertainment notables. The Hillside marketing and management team planned to select a design from the students' final projects that had the most commercial viability and the potential to become their "branded" urn. The winning student would receive a cash prize plus royalties in exchange for the design and manufacturing rights.

The directive for the students, says Takayama-Ogawa, was to design "a vessel

of reverence knowing someone would cry in front of it." The students considered it an important project and especially valued the experience of working with an actual client. The first step was to learn about the history of urns and their social and cultural implications—and that of cremation in Judaism. "These urns are intended to be a piece of art work that people are buying," comments Michael Kollins, assistant chair of the department. "They are objects that reflect upon the value of that person as well as the value of the piece."

Each student made 40 pencil drawings of urn shapes from which one sketch was selected for the design process. This would be turned into a scale model using clay—a medium chosen to provide the students with the opportunity to acquire ceramic skills. Turning next to the computer and 3-D printers, the students worked out the kinks of their designs and made the suggested modifications in form, shape and draft on the computer by using 3-D modeling software, typically Rhino and Illustrator. The students used CAD/CAM/3P to translate their clay sketch models into 3-D prototypes to be presented as the full-scale finished models of the final products.

In the end, the Hillside executives were so impressed with the work, they unexpectedly chose four urn designs instead of one. Whether achieved through high-tech or low-tech means, what mattered most to them was whether the aesthetics of the urns could withstand the test of time. Inarguably, product design students working with clay today at Otis are far afield of the

direction forged by Peter Voukos in the early 1950s at the ceramics studio. Yet they are utilizing tools and methodologies of traditional craft practices, while adding the advanced skills relevant in the digital world.

The monster of all product design courses at Otis is the class on "hard-line" durable products. For 2009-10, the assignment is to fabricate a California-modified cruising bicycle from metal and with working parts. "It takes a village to build a functioning bike in 13 weeks," instructor Randall Wilson comments. And that's exactly what the students do: they draw, design and style a rideable bike.

Using technologies from drawing software to computerized milling processes to hand fabrication, students translate their sketches into fully functioning bikes showing their understanding of ergonomics, mechanics, physics, aesthetics, construction and mobility. They acquire the hand skills of bending, drilling, cutting, grinding and finishing metal. They also learn to work with industry by outsourcing certain components. Once the bike is built, the students apply graphic design and hand-painting skills in the surface detailing of the frame.

Wilson feels that the project nearly dispels the myth that handcraftsmanship is no longer needed in our culture. "Computers do not make design any easier; the content hasn't changed; the methodologies have changed. By using all tools—conceptual, physical and digital—the abilities of designers are elevated; they are better equipped to unravel, expose and understand the substance of design." ▶



Bottom left:  
**Alex Hubbell**

*Rima: A Forever Vessel.* This student's RP and painted cremation urn represents the loved one's inner radiance, vitality of spirit and vibrancy of heart. The radiating pattern is inspired by rings of a tree.

Below:

Several of the finished California-modified cruising bicycles designed by students in a 13-week course in which they used a range of technologies including drawing software and computerized milling processes.



## Tools of the Creative Domain



The history, usage, meaning, making and aesthetics of tools are so central to the curriculum of Art Center College of Design that an exhibition and an associated course focused on the topic last fall. The Alyce de Roulet Williamson Gallery at Art Center presented the exhibition "TOOLS," co-organized by Stephen Nowlin and John O'Brien. Tools and Creativity—a class offered through the Integrated Studies department—was taught in the gallery during the run of the show by co-instructors Randall Wilson (who teaches at both Otis and Art Center) and Seth Kauffman.

The intersection of the dual learning formats offered through the exhibition and class was characteristic of the "horizontal" approach of Integrated Studies, a department founded on the principles of facilitating communication and cross-pollination between majors. The class was held in the gallery, says department chair Wendy Adest, so that the students would learn to "fabricate tools for the creative act and develop a better understanding of how tools influence our culture and thinking." This objective dovetailed with the curators' aim to elucidate the impact tools have had on human evolution and the power they have wielded over biological, cultural and social history

Top left and right: Instructor demonstrating metal cutting, and students at CNC machinery. Opposite: Student Nicole Ladcu working on the lathe; workshop in vacuum forming.

The starting point for the exhibition curators and class instructors was to view tools as an extension of the human body. Hammers, levers and punches extend the reach of the hand, wrist and arm; knives, scythes and axes are extensions of the jaw and teeth, compasses, microscopes, camera lenses, amplifiers and rulers enhance human senses. "Tools and human progress are the same story, and our long history as tool-makers, our compulsion to tinker with the limits of our reach and our senses, should be an endearment we share with those long-long-ago relations," explains Nowlin, referring to the ancestors who made the first tools from sticks and stones.

The curators searched collections of ancient, scientific and modern tools. "We looked for those instances in which artists took up the redesign of tools and implements in order to focus the viewer's attention on them as artifacts," adds O'Brien. The outcome was an impressive display of Neolithic stone tools alongside a full-scale model of the Mars Pathfinder Lander Rover, bracketed by artworks that looked like tools or commented on tool-ness.

The students' assignment was to create a drawing implement that would be an extension of the hand, wrist and arm. Further, the tool had to incorporate a moving

Art Center College of Design





Opposite top:  
**Jung Lim Park**  
*Pop wall clock*, Z-Corp  
3-D plaster-based print,  
clock mechanism, paint,  
rapid prototyping.

Opposite bottom:  
View of the "TOOLS"  
exhibition at the  
Williamson gallery  
with (foreground) Gail  
Wight's *Meaning of  
Mimicule*, of Plexiglas,  
electronics, software,  
LCD screen and audio.

Top:  
**Dominic Marchese**,  
*Fitted Form Pig*,  
lathe-turned wood,  
cast bronze.

Right:  
**Teodrus Hailye**  
*Leafblower Memorial*,  
mixed media (plastic),  
foam, faux bronze  
surfacing, hand-sculpt-  
ing, laser cutting,  
assembly painting.



mechanism that revolved. The drawing tools were to be made in the shops at Art Center. Collaborating with the shop technicians, students could learn the necessary materials and techniques. Additionally, the students had to be proficient in 2-D and 3-D computer modeling programs to render their design sketches digitally.

After the students fabricated their tool, each produced a drawing 4 by 15 feet. Drawing with extended reach required that the student relinquish a certain amount of control. The results were abstract compositions composed of rhythms and repeating lines. Wilson acknowledges: "Every tool speaks a language; every tool is unique. I wanted the student to confirm the direct relationship between the hand tool and the drawing, to recognize that each drawing was a response to the tool."

The rationale behind the exhibition and class was to reaffirm the primacy of *made by hand*. "Art Center has had a history of privileging the hand," Adest asserts. "The hand is considered the thinking tool." Wilson adds: "The computer is an advanced tool, but it is fundamentally an extension of the hand. The experience of working by hand with materials and manual tools informs the digital design process." The faculty at Art Center wants to ensure that students have both tool sets under their belt. It is a dated notion to polarize the hand and technology. Both are valid skill sets and should happily coexist in the expanded toolbox. ♦

*Jo Lauria is a curator and decorative art/design historian based in Los Angeles.*