

Shining the Light on CRAFT IN AMERICA

by Judy Seckler



A museum exhibition and companion book follow three-part PBS TV series.

What is it like to have your dream turned into a public television series on the lives of artists making ceramics, furniture, glassware, textiles, metalwork, jewelry, quilts and baskets? Don't bother asking entrepreneur Carol Sauvion, owner of the Freehand Gallery in Los Angeles. She's too busy in the editing room, putting the final touches on her TV project titled "Craft in America."

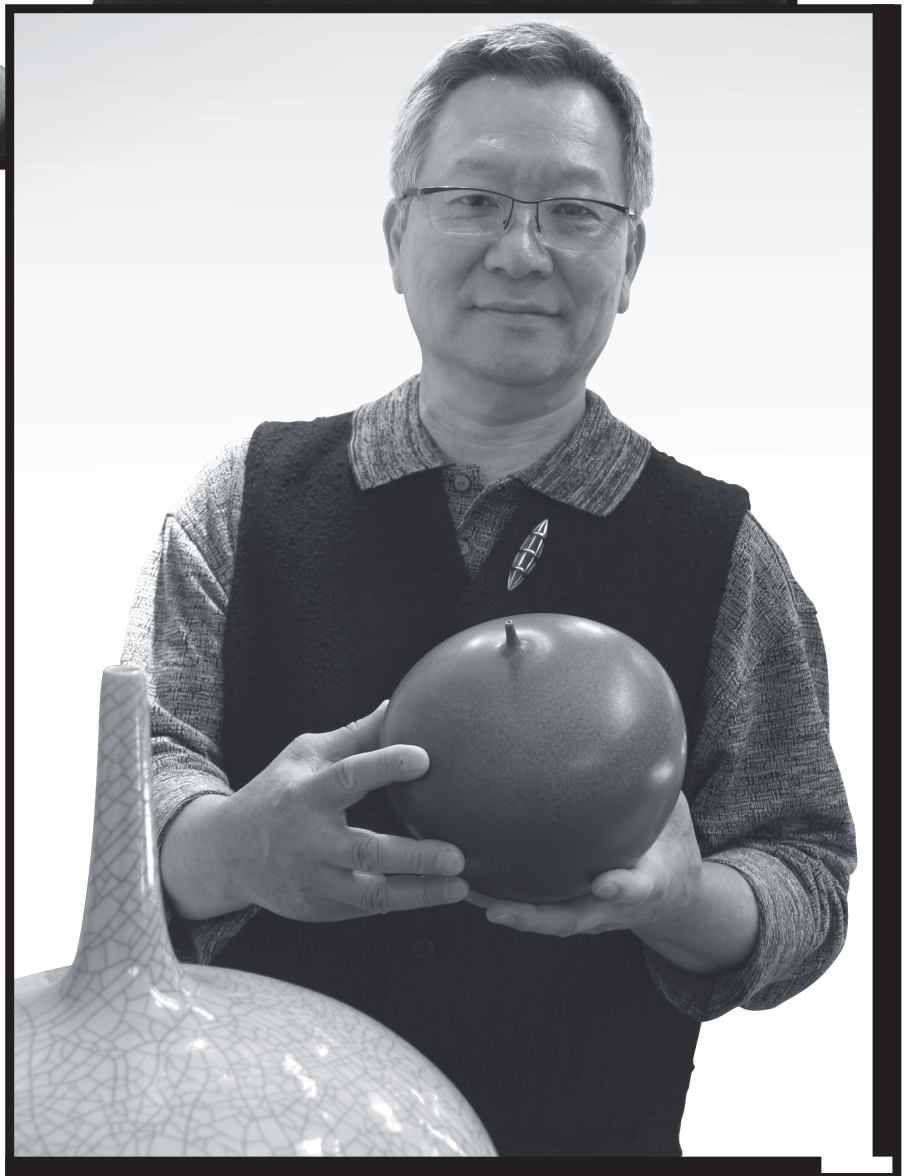
"I wanted the public to feel the vitality," she said. "These crafts change our lives. There's a hands-on aspect that doesn't exist in most places nowadays. Crafts cause us to become meditative."

The three-part PBS documentary series is scheduled to air Wednesday, May 30 at 8 p.m. (air times may vary around the country; check your local listing). In support of the series, a seven-city, two-year tour of a museum exhibition entitled "Craft in America: Expanding Traditions" begins on April 13 at the Arkansas Arts Center in Little Rock. The exhibition is also scheduled to appear in Portland, Oregon; San Diego, California; Houston, Texas; Bloomfield Hills, Michigan; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Palm Springs, California. Much of the series' revelations about craft and



Left: Nikki Lewis with her hand thrown, luster-fired teapot, 2005. *Photo: Lloyd Solly.*
Above: Adrian Saxe holding his handbuilt teapot. *Photo: Lloyd Solly.*
Right: Cliff Lee with glazed pots. *Photo: Jennifer Gerardi.*

These artists appear in *Craft in America: Celebrating Two Centuries of Artists and Objects*, by Steve Fenton and Jo Lauria. This companion book to the PBS series is due to be published in the fall of 2007 by Clarkson Potter (Random House).





Top: "Large Planter: Flaming Triangles," 30 in. (76 cm) in height, thrown stoneware, salt glazed, wood fired, 2004. *Photo: Jason Dowdle.*



Inset: Mark Hewitt examines a leather-hard vase in his studio. *Photo: Laure Camillieri.*

the insights provided by the artists, as well as extensive photographs are captured in a companion book titled "Craft in America: Celebrating Two Centuries of Artists and Objects," by Steve Fenton and Jo Lauria. Viewers looking for more information on the series can log on to www.craftinamerica.org.

Each hour of the series illustrates a major element in which craft thrives: memory, landscape and community.

So often the spirit and the stories of the creator are vividly recalled in the objects made, which is explored in the memory episode. Sometimes a skill is handed down from generation to generation or, in other cases, an artist is magnetically drawn to working with a particular material or process.

Ceramics artist David Gurney, featured in the landscape chapter, has "an inexhaustible source of inspiration" in the 22 miles of sand dunes that surround his studio in central California. "If you follow the things that inspire you, it will lead you to a good place," said the artist whose colorful pieces are assembled from individual handmade parts.

Ceramics artist Richard Notkin claims to be working in a political landscape instead of a literal one. His teapots are shaped like nuclear

reactors or skulls with mushroom clouds for lids. "Human history is filled with follies.... I deal with it by making art," said Notkin.

The community chapter recognizes that good work rarely happens in a vacuum. Ceramics artist Cynthia Bringle attended the Penland School of Crafts and has remained in the neighboring North Carolina town. Montana-based artist Sarah Jaeger is fully aware of creating functional pots for her community. "I love when people sit around eating and drinking, and pots are a part of that."

Sauvion's journey to get the project to the screen began ten years ago. Inspired by a six-week summer road trip she took with her parents at the age of eleven, she decided to give her son, who was the same age, a similar experience. Her husband had died five years earlier and it was important, she felt, to have an adventure that would bond the two of them. Her son was so enamored with baseball at the time that they visited historic ballparks and attended ball games around the nation.

At the same time, it was not lost on Sauvion, who'd owned her gallery for sixteen years at this point, that it would also be a perfect opportunity to visit the many artists she had befriended through her business and to meet new ones. It was a time of exploration



Matt Kelleher, artist in residence at Penland School of Crafts, altering a thrown form. Photo: Jennifer Gerardi.



Jenny Mendes, artist in residence at Penland School of Crafts, detailing a ceramic sculpture. Photo: Jennifer Gerardi.



Matthew Metz, hand-thrown, painted and carved vase and handbuilt box, 2005.

and discovery of the craft world as mother and son trekked across the country.

Sauvion, who had started her working life as a potter but traded it for the role of gallery owner after ten years, came to the conclusion that the only way to share her unique experience with the public would be through television. She wanted to celebrate the way craft is an extension of culture and the way, in many cases, it's an extension of a person's family history.

Well, creating a television series is a tall order, particularly if someone doesn't have prior experience or a network of broadcasting

contacts. However, Sauvion was so inspired she never thought about failing. Instead, she thought about where to begin. The gallery's client base provided just the right springboard. Freehand is known to many advertising, television and entertainment professionals who reside on Los Angeles' Westside. She recruited Steve Fenton, an advertising writer, to write a proposal for her project. Another client, Jacoba "Coby" Atlas, then co-president of PBS West Coast Programming, reviewed her proposal. When Atlas checked the station's archive in 2000 and saw that such a series had never been done before, she was on board.

In the next two years a script was penned by Kyra Thompson, a team of filmmakers was assembled, including directors Nigel Nobel (part 1), Daniel Seeger (part2) and Hilary Birmingham (part3), and a budget was drawn up. The budget was presented to executives at PBS national headquarters. According to Sauvion, what tipped the scale in her favor was that many PBS executives were weekend crafters. Once she had a green light, Sauvion's next big push was securing money for the project. She received a \$600,000 challenge grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and another \$100,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. And once again, she dipped into her client list and raised the rest of the money through individual donations mostly from Los Angeles' patrons; several generations of them.

The series is a valentine to craft artists everywhere whose handmade objects are a reminder that history is not only recorded in words but in the objects that are left behind.

"Craft is as old as we are," said Sauvion. "It's the oldest human activity."

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Right: "Cube Skull Teapot (Variation # 23)," Yixing Series, 11½ in. (30 cm) in height, stoneware, 2000, by Richard Notkin.
Below: Wayne Higby's raku bowl titled "Seclusion Lake" is one of the works featured in *Craft in America*. *Photo courtesy of the artist.*

