

Craft in America: Memory, Landscape, Community

DVD, three hours. Directors, Nigel Noble, Daniel Seeger and Hilary Birmingham, executive producers, Carol Sauvion and Kyra Thompson, a co-production of Craft in America, Inc. and the Independent Television Service (ITVS). 1-800-752-9727. \$24.99.

—Reviewed by Robert Silberman

The musical theme for *Craft in America*, the three-part PBS series that airs nationwide May 30, is the Shaker “Simple Gifts,” sung by a group of women in smooth, soothing a capella harmonies. The refrain, “When we find ourselves in the place just right . . . turning, turning we come round right,” is a perfect match for shots of pottery on the wheel, and a perfect guide to the spirit of the series. It is a gift to be simple in the elevated, pure Shaker manner. It is also a gift to be simple in the purist high modern style of the furniture of Sam Maloof or the baskets developed out of traditional African-American models by Mary Jackson. The series features that work, and also tries to accommodate the impure, raucous spirit of Garry Knox Bennett, who once banged a bent nail into the side of a cabinet because it was getting precious; the political passion of Richard Notkin, obsessed with the Holocaust, the atom bomb and war; and the determination of Jan Yager to find beauty in her immediate surroundings, even if that means making jewelry from the detritus of her Philadelphia neighborhood, including crack vials. Those artists get different music, but what they and contemporary craft really require is a different overall approach, one that would more fully acknowledge the broader context: the art world, media culture, contemporary life in all its complexity and force.

As the choice of theme suggests, *Craft in America* views the crafts with a secular communal piety. Obviously a labor of love, as an amalgam of art, picturesque scenery, multiculturalism, liberal politics and New Age spirituality, the series is in its own way a pitch-perfect expression of PBS today and its (aging) audience. Forget the latest network TV series trolling for twenty-somethings in prime time. With a precision that transcends focus groups and statistical targeting, this production zeroes in on a particular demographic; it might well have been sponsored by the AARP. One moving sequence considers a couple where the husband has suffered a stroke, thereby raising health care issues (and plugging the Craft Emergency Relief Fund), while the Maloof segment stresses the contribution of his beloved late wife. A segment on Timberline Lodge at Mount Hood, ostensibly about collaboration, restoration and revival, at first struck me as a wayward bit from the PBS series “Great Lodges of the National Parks” (which included Timberline), until I decided it was a disguised call for government support for the arts, if not a wholesale revival of the New Deal. A segment on quilts highlights National Heritage Award winner Hystercine Rankin, an African-American, but also emphasizes the integrated Southern workshop, the Cultural Crossroads, as if to ask, “Can’t we all just quilt together and get along?”

Craft in America demonstrates excellent cinematic craftsmanship, with an especially deft handling of historical footage and photographs for those brief passages when it does address the past: the first program gets through the Industrial Revolution and the Arts and Crafts movement in

under three minutes. The series largely avoids chronological history—“BOR-ing”?—instead taking a not entirely satisfactory thematic approach, with programs organized around Memory (really tradition), Landscape and Community. Each program builds upon a series of individual profiles, similar to what might be found on *60 Minutes*. To its credit, the series also covers institutions: Pilchuck, Penland, the Archie Bray Foundation, the Smithsonian Craft Show. Those segments seem like mini-promotional films, maybe because in a way they are.

For all its virtues the series in the end suffers from its celebratory approach and relentless “stay-on-message” tactics, in particular when it comes to insisting that craft skills and traditions are being—must be—passed on to the next generation. I think the insistence backfires, by unintentionally suggesting a sense of crisis rather than the desired “alive and well” feeling, and by inducing an “I get it, I get it already” response. The infamous art-craft distinction is only allowed to rear its ugly head a couple of times, but then is inadequately addressed. Tom Joyce proclaims there is no separation between blacksmithing and making art, and that may be fine for him. It is too simple by half, however, for any credible treatment of the issues—and his work. Kit Carson, who brings a Captain Jack Sparrow quality to the proceedings, half-jokingly promotes his junkyard assemblages as his “art,” as opposed to his neo-art nouveau jewelry “craft.” Most television coverage of art is caught up in the twin cults of personality and creativity, and that is understandable. But this series still must be found wanting for the almost total absence of ideas in its consideration of the development of modernist studio craft out of traditional crafts, especially ethnic and native ones.

“Simple Gifts” is lovely, a tune that keeps going round and round in one’s head. And the usual second-guessing about inclusions and exclusions aside, I still respect the overall achievement of this series, which has more than its share of memorable elements. But “Simple Gifts” was written in 1848. By the end of the last episode of *Craft in America*, I was ready to turn up some rock music real loud, pour a libation of Jack Daniel’s, and see if I could conjure up the ghost of Peter Voulkos, to ask what he found so damned exciting about working in clay in the first place.

“Craft in America: Expanding Traditions,” a related touring exhibition, Jo Lauria, chief curator, and Jeannine Falino, Dale Gluckman, Steven L. Grafe and Kenneth R. Trapp, contributing curators, opened at the Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock (April 13–June 24), and will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland, Oregon (July 22–September 23), and other venues into 2009. An illustrated book, *Craft in America: Celebrating Two Centuries of Artists and Objects*, prologue by President Jimmy Carter, will be published by Clarkson-Potter in the fall of 2007.

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