

Broadcasting

The America that was made by hand

A new series on US television channel PBS celebrates the history, culture and practice of crafts



**MEDIA
REVIEW**

**JUDITH
BUMPUS**

Craft in America airs nationwide in the US on May 30 on PBS, America's Public Broadcasting Service channel. This three-part television series accompanies a two-year touring exhibition "Craft in America: Expanding Traditions" (from 13 April, Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock), and will be available on DVD. The accompanying book by Jo Lauria and Steve Fenton (Clarkson Potter, October) has a foreword by former US President Jimmy Carter, a maker himself and, like presidents before and since, a strong supporter of American craft.

Would that the same enthusiasm pervaded Downing Street. England once led the world in craft, as Gerhard Knodel, Director of Cranbrook Academy of Art, tells us. "The Arts and Crafts movement...advocated a return to well-made, well-designed objects and a connection to both the artistic process and the natural world." Its impact on the US was profound. Driven by individual enterprise, educational zeal, philanthropy, and private patronage, craft practice has gathered momentum since the 1920s. Hysterine Rankin from Mississippi made quilts for the family out of necessity. After receiving a \$10,000 National Heritage Award and the congratulations of

Hillary Clinton, she says: "How far can a needle carry you?"

The strength of this superb series lies in its oral testimony. We see where and how practising crafts people work as they tell us their own tale. Narrator Randy Oglesby performs well as a stage-setter: "Glass, clay, wood, fibre. Human hands transform humble materials into works of function and beauty, creating objects that hold the memory of who we are as people. How were the traditions of craft kept vital by today's finest artists, and how has the legacy of craft been reimagined as a modern art form?" These themes underpin three hour-long programmes on "Memory", "Landscape" and "Community".

In part one, we meet Mary Jackson, passing on traditional basket weaving techniques to her daughter and granddaughter. She recalls the history of her family, brought from West Africa as slaves. The slave owners needed baskets on their plantations. "This is one of the reasons why this art form is still in place today," she tells us, "because they regarded my ancestors as more valuable slaves, so they didn't separate the family...I have a really strong feeling about making every stitch." As a child she hated it. After morning chores the whole family assembled in the shade and made baskets. Her mother said: "One day you might want to know how to do this." That day came. She let her imagination run, developing her designs in a contemporary idiom with sweeping, sculptural handles and free-flowing grasses. Invited to show at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, the commissions started coming.

Part two asks us: "How does landscape influence the act of creation? And how do artists translate this influence into a landscape shaped

by their own hands?" Landscape is broadly interpreted, embracing industrial urbanism, woods, West Coast sand dunes, as well as mental and emotional landscape. Living in a troubled area of Philadelphia, Jan Yager finds inspiration on urban wasteland, and on the streets. "I have to find beauty where I live," she says. She looked for materials that were of their place and time, in the vicinity of her studio. Plastic containers for crack cocaine were everywhere. She collected them and cast their tops in gold, and strung them into necklaces, like a 1,000-year old example she found made of bone. "It was a common, readily available material. My readily available material was the crack phials."

Richard Notkin's landscape is political (his *Cube Skull Teapot (Variation #23)*, 2000, right). He is an artist working with clay, projecting his anger about the world, war, and human folly, into his ceramics. "I use a teapot metaphorically," he says. "The vessel is really the primary canvas of ceramics, and the teapot is the most complex of vessels...I'm trying to make pots that...speak of my times, my country, my concerns." Footage he saw as a child of the Nazi concentration camps had a lasting impact. In his *Legacy Project*, piles of bodies and piles of shoes become piles of ears, a traditional way of counting the dead in war, he says: "They are ears that are stone deaf. They're not learning the lessons that are all around us."

Part three carries the message that, where crafts involve the whole community, tradition thrives. We are introduced to the Mississippi Cultural Crossroads centre, where local women gather to make collaborative quilts. Taken to extremes, a nationwide effort resulted in the *Aids Quilt* (1987), "the world's largest

community art project". We get a taste of the community spirit in the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts, and the Pilchuck Glass School, co-founded by Dale Chihuly. "It's not uncommon to hear that this place has changed someone's life," says Jamez de la Torre, an artist working in mixed media. This was the case with Dona Look's husband Ken Loeber. After a severe stroke, it was the support and encouragement of the local community in Wisconsin that helped get him back into the studio.

As visitors to the Smithsonian Craft Show agree, such events fulfil "a social need", the need for the handmade, for pieces that remind us of "who we are", and of our "connection to others". ■

□ **Craft in America**, three-part series on Public Service Broadcasting (PBS), a co-production of Craft in America, Inc. and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), 30 May, 8pm EST/PST. Major funders: the Corporation of Public Broadcasting (CPB) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Presented in association with KCET/Los Angeles. Created by Carol Sauvion. Writer Kyra Thompson. Narrator Randy Oglesby. I. "Memory". Director Nigel Nobel. II. "Landscape". Director Daniel Seeger. III. "Community". Director Hilary Birmingham.

