

**Television**

Several series, including the comedy *30 Rock*, wrap up their seasons this week.

PAGE 3E

# STYLE

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

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*Cushioned Bowl* by Michelle Holzapel



*Coiled Cedar Root Berry Basket* by Nettie Jackson (Kikital)



*Silver Chanel-Set Bracelet* by Charles Loloma



*Miss United States and Miss Universe Crown* by Allan Adler



*Conoid Chair* by George Nakashima

# Hands and hearts

The Arkansas Arts Center's 'Craft in America' exhibit celebrates contemporary handicraft and links it to its past

BY CELIA STOREY  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

**T**he Arkansas Arts Center's new exhibit, "Craft in America: Expanding Traditions," is like a box of chocolates — made of silk.

You might drool, but not on the box. Do not touch. And do not assume you already know what you will find here.

Even if you've already seen the first part of the accompanying three-part PBS documentary (*Craft in America: Memory — Part 1* aired Wednesday on AETN), don't imagine you know all about this comfy stuff that has moved in over at the art museum. Because, no, you don't.

This exhibit is not "Crafts in America" or "Crafty in America," although many crafters will eat it up.

Some of the work on view is as prickly as the pointy cap of the A in that hard word "Art." But you don't need a degree in fine arts to like what you see or to understand it. Anyone who has tried his own hands in the crafts represented will find something comforting to cling to. Metaphorically speaking.

Do not touch, but please do think about your hands.

The TV series associated with this traveling exhibit is mostly about people. It profiles a handful of master craftsmen and tells their significantly different stories. It tracks the origins of the Arts and Crafts Movement (1890-1930) as a reaction against the hand-mashing machinery of the Industrial Age. Then it steps forward into our electronic era and meets philosophical descendants — or kindred spirits — who honor good hand workmanship and find community among others who feel the same way about the "moral superiority" of objects created by hand.

The camera enters artists' workshops, records their eloquence and even peeks at their process — the step-by-step of their how-to.

That's TV. The exhibit is also about people, obliquely, but (except for a few who appeared in the flesh for the opening events April 12-15 and joked engagingly about *American Idol* and *Survivor*), the artists aren't hanging around the Arkansas Arts Center, and you can't watch them do their thing. They can't

See CRAFT on Page 2E

## No denying Disney's magic

There's a sequel to the summer 2002 vaca-

## Bertrand enlightens as it dreams

BY JACK W. HILL  
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

LET'S TALK

## Craft

• Continued from Page 1E  
lean forward from the walls to explain their process, not even as holograms.

All that visitors can see are 185 objects strewn behind these careful strangers' lives like so many loaves propped on pedestals, spotlighted and cordoned off from your interested hands.

But to quote the big white and rather wordy placard posted just inside the front door of the galleries, "Objects are the only real events from history." Maybe you don't need the people to learn something from the exhibit.

### THE THINGS THEMSELVES

Rugs, tiaras, baskets, quilts, bowls, jars, chairs, platters, tea sets, gates, a fork and a spoon, a mighty lowerpot — some are born from traditional methods taught by grandmas and grandpas down through generations. Many are obviously useful. Maybe your neighbors would gasp if you decanted your Chef Boyardee Mini-Raviolis onto Maria Martinez and Popovi Da's Black on Black Plate With Avanyu Motif — but, hey, it is a nice big plate.

Others are not functional at all, and challenge viewers to reflect on the meaning of craft. For instance, Arkansas wood artist Robyn Horn's *Already in Motion* is a short cascade of chain-saw-cut rectangles somehow attached to one another to create a ratchety arc.

"This is the story about craft, design and decorative arts segueing, transforming into contemporary arts," says Jo Lauria, national curator for the exhibit.

So "Craft in America," the exhibit, includes an anonymous 19th-century Shaker meeting chair, its simplicity still conveying deep respect for service without splinters, and also George Nakashima's *Conoid Bench and Back*, an extravagantly simple cross-section of a massive and still forked walnut tree topped with delicate rosewood and hickory spindles. "He called himself the Japanese Shaker," Lauria notes.

Both appear masterfully made. But a viewer wandering the exhibit will eventually stray into a room filled with merely chairlike arm-works. Better not even to think about how your fancy would feel perched atop Therman Statom's *Divorare* — it looks more like a pinball machine than a chair.

Long tradition underlies some of the things on display. Looking at, for instance, the baskets contemporary crafters have woven in traditional African or American Indian forms, you can take notes on history. But other things here were designed to carry ideas.

Myra Mimitich-Gray's melted sterling silver *Candelabrum*, *Seven Fragments* wouldn't hold a taper upright but it holds a message about the brevity of life; Donna D'Aquino's wrist-fencing *Wire Bracelet* would snag and ruin a ball-gown, but it speaks eloquently about repression disguised as beauty.

Such crafted objects are so far evolved from tradition that their uses would only be those subtle spiritual ones philosophers call "aesthetic," pretexts for an argument, topics for a blog, baptismal fonts for the daily rebirth of wonder.

And that's why all this stuff isn't laid out in a friendly, homey setting where interested crafters could pick it up.

### R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Carol Sauvion, founder and director of the Freehand Gallery in Los Angeles, began working toward the Craft in America nonprofit and all its synergistic permutations (TV show, national traveling exhibit, book, Web site, gallery talks and moderated screenings) 11 years ago.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON  
Caleb Siemon's blown-glass *Banded Low Bowl* beams in the foreground as Jo Lauria, national curator of "Craft in America: Expanding Traditions," tours the show's first installation at the Arkansas Arts Center.

## You can look but you better not touch

If your fingers itch to touch the objects on display at "Craft in America: Expanding Traditions," then you've caught the concept, Nan Plummer says.

The Arkansas Arts Center's executive director adds, "It's one of the paradoxes of a show like this" that the more successful the exhibit is as communication, the more visitors will be tempted to touch its objects — which would hurt exhibit and objects.

"That's something that we worry about all the time in the art museum, and that's a fine line we walk because we want people to be that interested and to get that close, but even one touch over time can leave corrosive oils and salts and everyday dirt on a piece that can damage it," she says. "And if lots of people do that then we're really in trouble."

But the thing about a lot of these objects in the craft tradition, she says, is "they either are for use or they refer to something that is, something that you would hold in your hand, like a teapot you would hold in your lap, or a quilt you would put your whole body under.

Her idea arose, she says, from the realization that amid the cell-phone-toting, wired-up and Internetted consumer economies of Right Now, a significant subculture still devotes itself to the creation and appreciation of fine hand-crafts.

"It's not a career for them, it's a calling," she says.

At the same time, many of the artists profiled for the TV series (and on its companion Web site, which will launch in mid-May) didn't want to be pigeonholed by the generic terms for craftsmen who work in their media, such as "jeweler" or "woodworker."

"They wanted to be called 'artists,'" Sauvion says. "They are using these crafts materials to make art."

In other words, they'd like their efforts to be taken seriously.

"When Jan Yager makes a tiara and it takes her a year to research it and to construct it and to think about it, she's making a piece not to be worn by one person, but she's making a piece for people to look at and to think about," Sauvion says.

Yager's *Tiara of Useful Knowledge* can be found and studied in the exhibit, and TV viewers can watch her gathering the wildflowers that inspired it from a weed lot in her crack-up neighborhood, and drawing them, translating them bit by bit to metal and shaping the unfinished parts.

Standing before the vitrine case that shields her *Tiara* from itchy fingers, exhibitgoers who will never meet Yager can see in her object the handprint of devotion.

Viewers will also think about why things made by hand are important, Sauvion says: "Why they have more meaning for us

"They do evoke that tactile, three-dimensional response.

"If people have that urge, then they got it." How did the Arkansas Arts Center become the first museum in the country to get this significant traveling exhibit?

"We wanted to be," she says. "We had the chance and we asked to be and we're very proud to be. We have a wonderful collection of contemporary craft here, and a very devoted audience for it and we want to grow that audience because it's an important part of what we do."

Several pieces from the museum's own collection of contemporary craft will tour the country with the exhibit, including Dorothy Gill Barnes' wooden vessel *Ella's Mulberry Marked*, Wayne Higby's raku-fired pot *Tower Bridges Canyon*, Robyn Horn's chain-sawed sculpture *Already Set in Motion*, Carol Eckert's cotton-wrapped sculpture *Tale of Three Ravens*, David Ellsworth's white-oak bowl *Mo's Delight* and David Sengel's dramatic black wood sculpture *Nightbirds*.

— Celia Storey



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON

Masterful baskets show how modern hands play with traditional forms: (top) Mary Jackson wound bullrushes around pine needles and sweetgrass for *Gobra With Handle*; (bottom) Billie Fultz Sudduth made *Fibonacci Rising of henna- and iron-dyed spill oak and reeds*.

engost's *Punch Bowl From the Jazze* Series gleams under its spotlight, daring you to hug it — but it's safely boxed away from you.

Not far away a much smaller and drab *Bowl* left behind by one of Schreckengost's teachers, Marguerite Wildenhain, rests disdainfully beside Elio Saarinen's shiny, shiny (space-ship? elephant? burger restaurant?) samovar.

Wildenhain was a paragon of Finnish austerity who fled the Nazis all the way to California. Looking at her unprepossessing dish with its rustic brownish green glaze and concentric rings of black stain, you just want to turn that little puppy over to inspect the foot she trimmed — to figure out what's so marvelous about this bowl that it's in a museum exhibit.

Lauria says Wildenhain's Teutonic approach to achievable excellence set off long ripples in American craft. She required her students to throw and slice open 100 of any form before they were allowed to glaze and fire even one for keeps.

Want to make a bowl? First make 100 bowls.

Do your very best.

### PERSONAL TOUCH

A tour de force of personal woodcraft like Frank E. Cummings III's *Carousel Age of Awareness* must fill woodworkers with respect akin to awe.

How many years did he spend preparing to turn this large walnut vessel and its looping crown of wooden lace? How many years of his life did he work on his hand-eye control to be able to carve the right elegant little ebony horse?

The placard beside *Carousel* explains that "the artist views this piece as an outward expression of carosello (a 17th-century Italian word meaning 'little war'), representing his 'personal struggles with identity, desire, passion, achievement and recognition.' Each individual

ally hand-carved ebony horse is looking out over the rim of the vessel, positioned in an active stance, strong and sure-footed and ready to engage the real world, unlike the amusement park carousel horses anchored by a pole and veiled in fantasy."

That's a lot to say, but it's right there in the pot, and the pot's so gorgeous that, yes, you will stand there long enough to see what he has said even though you cannot pick it up.

From the anonymous Acoma Pueblo artisan in New Mexico who decorated a fat, round clay pot with a fine parrot; through the giant urn by David "Dave the Potter" Drake, the first slave potter known to have signed his name to his work; to Cummings' elaborate self-expression in wood, "Craft in America" celebrates artistic individuality — the urge to leave a mark, to stamp the self upon something so well-made that a Marguerite Wildenhain would allow you to keep it — and so wonderful to behold that John Q. Public will buy a museum ticket to get a look.

No, you can't pick up Drake's *Food Storage Bowl Made for John Monday*. You couldn't pick it up even if this monster urn weren't encased in vitrine. But you can study how confidently the slave potter blended its two ample handles onto the side of the pot. You can get a sense for one of the things he knew — that filmy handles crack off.

Through the thing, a mere object, the strong man whose fingers once pushed throwing rings through clay becomes a teacher.

Between the artist's hand and your questioning hand stands the museum guard. But you're free to learn what you can by looking and to carry away whatever inspiration might apply to your own things, the things you make. Make them better. Do your best. Recognize others who have more skill than you and celebrate creativity with them.

That's what all this fuss is about.

### CRAFT IN AMERICA EXHIBIT

"Craft in America: Expanding Traditions" Arkansas Arts Center, East Ninth and Commerce streets, Little Rock, \$12 adults, \$8 senior citizens and students 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday through June 24. (501) 372-4000.

### PBS DOCUMENTARY

■ On AETN: (Part 1 aired last week.) *Craft in America: Landscape* — Part 2, 7 p.m. Wednesday, *Community* — Part 3, 7 p.m. May 2. All three parts will air in succession from 7-10 p.m. May 30.  
■ At the Arts Center: Single episodes of the PBS series will be screened and followed by discussion at 5 p.m. May 6, May 13, May 20.

### WEB SITE

Film of artists at work photos and history will be online at [www.craftinamerica.org](http://www.craftinamerica.org) sometime in mid-May.

### BOOK

*Craft in America: Celebrating Two Centuries of Artists and Objects*, by Jo Lauria and Steve Fenton (Random House, Oct. 9), 304 pages, 200 photographs, \$60. The book can be pre-ordered at [www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com).

than things that are manufactured. And why what we put around ourselves tells us a lot about who we are."

### HUSH

"Context is everything," Lauria says, checking out the Arts Center's display for the first time.

"I'm so happy to see these objects in a contemporary environment," she adds. "So often craft and decorative objects are relegated to historic homes, which are fine for small, domestic-sized and functioning objects but not particularly apt for or well-suited for objects which then turn into sculptural expressions of art."

"For 'Craft in America,' the 7,500-square-foot Townsend Wolfe and Jeannette Edris Rockefeller galleries are shuttered and spotlighted to create a reverential mood that slows a visitor's steps and shuts his

mouth. The space says, "Capital-A Art."

But meanwhile, Sam Maloof's *Double Rocker* rounds its arms and its spindles, which he has shaped to embrace two backseats — you and your sweetheart, side by side.

"Sit down," this rocking bench all but whispers. "Touch my radiant walnut. Touch me, touch me."

A friend's husband, a middle-aged, respectable grown-up, had to be fussed at by guards during his visit. He works in wood in his own shop; his wife shows her paintings and pots around town; he knew better. But the first thing he did was lay his hands on *Double Rocker's* satiny curves.

"Sir, do not touch!"

### HIGH STANDARDS

The vivid blue and black of 100-year-old Viktor Schreck-