TOP MARKS

BY GLENN ADAMSON

What does the very best in modern American craft look like? The present auction, drawn from the Pinnacle Collection of Mount Dora, Florida, gives you the answer. You will never see a greater assembly of studio furniture. Gathered here are some of the most important works of the three most influential makers in that discipline's history: Wharton Esherick, who came before them all, charting a previously unknown territory where sculpture and furniture meet; Wendell Castle, who, directly inspired by Esherick, became the most consistently inventive maker furniture has ever known; and George Nakashima, who incarnated the idea of craft as a serene, spiritual pursuit. This extraordinary triumvirate is accompanied by other, equal talents, traversing the whole of the twentieth century. This is, quite simply, as good as modern craft gets.

In providing this picture, however, the present auction raises other questions. For the craft canon is anything but a settled affair. Despite their own heroic efforts, and those of earlier generations of curators and collectors, the movement's leading lights never really got the attention they deserved. Only now are they emerging fully from the shadows.

It's hardly news that the likes of Esherick, Sam Maloof, and Samuel Yellin are important figures, of course – though only recently have full biographies been written about them.[1] Deeply researched exhibition catalogues about Paul Evans, Peter Voulkos, and Harry Bertoia, among many others, are hitting the shelves.[2] Some figures who really were obscure, like J. B. Blunk, are being recognized for their prodigious talents.[3] The Archive of American Art has assiduously collected papers and oral histories, preserving the primary texts and voices of the craft movement for future generations. We even have our first full catalogue raisonné in the field, on the work of Wendell Castle.[4]

1 Mansfield Bascom, *Wharton Esherick: The Journey of a Creative Mind* (Harry N. Abrams, 2010); Jeremy Adamson [no relation to the present author], *The Furniture of Sam Maloof* (W.W. Norton, 2006); Joe Cunningham, *Samuel Yellin: Metalworker* is forthcoming in 2023. The Wharton Esherick Museum in Malvern, Pennsylvania, received a $10 million endowment grant from the Windgate Foundation in 2020.

2 Constance Kimmerle, ed., *Paul Evans: Crossing Boundaries & Crafting Modernism* (Arnoldsche/James A. Michener Museum, 2014); Glenn Adamson, Barbara Paris Gifford, and Andrew Perchuk, *Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years* (Museum of Arts and Design, 2016); Jed Morse and Marin Sullivan, eds, *Harry Bertoia: Sculpting Mid-Century Modern Life* (Nasher Sculpture Center, 2022).

3 Mariah Nielson, *J. B. Blunk* (Blunk Books/Dent-de-Leone, 2020).

4 Emily Evans Eerdmans, et al., *Wendell Castle: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1958-2012* (D.A.P., 2014).

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Yet we still need to ask: which craft artists really deserve credit for making the greatest advances, and what was the nature of those breakthroughs? And, within those makers' oeuvres, what are the truly consequential pieces, the real moments of creative transformation? A consensus is beginning to form around these matters. And in this context, a sale of this stellar quality is an extraordinary opportunity.

There can be little doubt about the art historical neglect of craft in comparison to the fine arts. But the lack of an authoritative canon has also been, to some extent, intentional. The studio craft movement was a democratic phenomenon from its inception, in the 1940s. Its founder, Aileen Osborn Vanderbilt Webb, arrived to her enthusiasm for the project via a rural development organization called Putnam County Products. She set the agenda for her new national council in this spirit, forming its various initiatives – a shop (America House), a school (the School for American Craftsmen), a magazine *(Craft Horizons)* and eventually a museum (the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, today's Museum of Arts and Design) – as supports for thousands of makers across the nation.

Under Webb's leadership, the craft movement initially aimed at the aesthetic improvement of everyday life. Quality was a consideration, but so too was inclusiveness, just as it was in the design program at the Museum of Modern Art (just next door from the original Museum of Contemporary Crafts, on 53rd Street in Manhattan). The goal was to build the broadest base, not the highest peaks. Some of the most accomplished postwar craftspeople, including Nakashima, Maloof, and Art Espenet Carpenter, took this egalitarian approach to heart. They made objects that were beautiful, but also affordable. This was a movement aimed at the hearts and minds of the middle class.

While in many respects a commendable approach, this was also a recipe for inherent tension. As figures like Castle and Voulkos arrived on the scene, their sheer, unvarnished ambition put the communitarian basis of the movement under strain. They manifested an individualism that was intense, uncompromising, recalling that of earlier figures like Esherick (a major inspiration for Castle), as well as singular Arts and Crafts-era experimentalists like Yellin and Charles Rohlfs.

The new generation of makers looked to the fine arts, not only for ideas but for their professional models. Beginning in the 1960s, their leading-edge craft objects – or were they sculptures? – were getting shown in specialist galleries, not shops. They had as their intended ultimate destination not living rooms, but museums. One has only to look at the contents of this sale to see how the discipline of furniture reshaped itself. In the immediate postwar moment, the field had taken its inspiration from functional design, especially out of Scandinavia. Increasingly, figures like Castle, Blunk, Evans and Judy McKie embraced the principles of modern sculpture – then made up their own, generating wholly new languages of form.

These developments were much debated at the time, and have remained controversial ever since. What is not in doubt is that the critical infrastructure lagged badly behind. There were bright spots, to be sure. Paul J. Smith, director at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, led by example, curating a prolific run of fascinating exhibitions. The most important of these was *Objects: USA,* which he organized with dealer Lee Nordness. It toured to an astonishing thirty museums in America and Europe – a rare instance in which the craft field was able to preach well beyond the ranks of its converted.[5] Rose Slivka, editor of *Craft Horizons,* was another energetic and effective advocate, establishing the foundational account of Voulkos's work, among many others.[6] Groundbreaking historical work was also done by the pioneering dealers in the field, notably Helen Drutt and Garth Clark.

5 Lee Nordness and Paul J. Smith, *Objects: USA* (Viking, 1970); see also Glenn Adamson, ed., *Objects: USA 2020* (Monacelli/R & Company, 2020).

6 Rose Slivka, *Peter Voulkos: A Dialogue With Clay* (New York Graphic Society, 1978).

Were it not for the essential documentation done by these and other figures, the current effort to assess studio craft would have precious little to go on. (Just look at the footnotes and bibliographies in this catalogue.) Today, though, there is a new opportunity at hand. Studio craft, as a discrete movement, is passing gradually into history. It's a victim, one could say, of its own belated success, as its key materials and concerns are at last being successfully integrated into the mainstream. For example, it has become the rule rather than the exception for fine art galleries to show ceramics and textiles. The contemporary furniture design scene, meanwhile, though aesthetically and philosophically far removed from studio craft, is dominated by self-invented, ingenious makers, and all the stronger because of it.[7]

This process of absorption is still underway, but already we are beginning to see the craft movement much more objectively. As the dust settles, those peaks are coming into increasing definition. Secondary market venues, in tandem with private collections, are taking on a crucial role in this moment. Sotheby's and other auction houses are emerging as key platforms for the reconsideration and – equally importantly – the in-depth study of objects.

The Pinnacle Collection, previously displayed to the general public at the Museum of Modernism in Mount Dora, Florida, has been one of the definitive private holdings in the field, establishing qualitative parameters at an objective distance. That kind of connoisseurship, in this moment of re-evaluation, is key: after all, the modern craft movement, as enduring and varied as it was, could only produce so many masterworks. When so many are brought together in one place at one time, it's not just an opportunity to rewrite history. It's a historical event in its own right: an unprecedented chance to look at modern craft, over the course of its development, at the height of its powers.

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7 On the debt of contemporary design to studio craft, see Glenn Adamson, "The Three Pillars of Design," *Design Edit* (8 November, 2021).

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