

New Horizon of Ceramic Art

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New Horizon of Ceramic Art 도자예술의 새 지평

Money, Politics, Globalization, and the Role of Institutions in 21st Century Ceramics

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The purpose of this talk is to show how the forces of money, politics and globalization are exerting radical changes in the way we think about cultural institutions and their roles in the future. More specifically, the interactions among these forces are examined with a view toward gauging the prospects for the long-term viability of those institutions engaged in the promotion and support of the ceramic arts.

At New York University, in my Department of Art, we recently hired a full professor to fill a position that did not exist fifteen years ago. He is a professor of "Visual Culture". He studies the impact upon our individual and collective psyches of the mountain of visual stimuli that daily rain down upon us from a world driven to a broadband frenzy by unfettered technology.

The visual world is and will remain the dominant source of sensory input in the 21st Century and the Internet has become the global latchkey to the instantaneous and simultaneous sharing of this new reality. One of its functions is to stimulate, through the carefully contrived visual image, a "correct" emotional response. That response may be a behavioral one (a silhouette of a dancing figure moves an individual to buy an Ipod), or an attitudinal one (a carefully positioned presidential candidate on an aircraft carrier is designed to move an unsophisticated viewer to a sense of national pride).

Corporations of the world know this well. They know that the Internet, and the shortened attention span that comes from searching the Internet, requires carefully constructed visual stimuli to first attract and then control mass behavior. As a result, students, who have grown up in the late 20th and early 21st Century, have been exposed to literally millions of flat, contrived visual images. One carefully-documented result of this is that the younger generation tends to think two-dimensionally rather than three.

Television, the predecessor to the internet and, indeed, the preparer of the populace for the internet, had for years created a world view which has been described, by some, as the "flattening of experience" -in other words, a generalized trend towards superficiality. Allan Bloom had noted that this view was part of the dumbing down of America and described it in his 1987 book: "The Closing of the American Mind."

Television images of well-dressed, well-educated, middleclass individuals with all the time in the world, engaged in acts of mind-numbing buffoonery are offered to millions of viewers as reality, and are believed. The result is shock and disillusionment for those who have been lead by television to think that their mere existence automatically guaranteed them access to the largesse of the world -only to rudely discover the amount of work, frustration, and time required to achieve anything of merit.

But why discuss this? Well, it is preliminary to a discussion of the word "craft." The word "craft" implies work, an apprenticeship, which itself implies an arduous period of learning during which the student, through servitude, some guidance, and trial and error, eventually hopes to achieve mastery of a medium. However, as we have suggested, this process of apprenticeship is at odds with the 21st Century dream image of instant gratification provided by the corporate image-makers that shape our world-view.

So it is not surprising, for example, that the American Craft Museum, after hiring an image consultant, and conducting a national survey to assess public reaction to the word craft, decided to drop that term in favor of the more popular word -"design" - becoming the Museum of Arts & Design.

In reality, this was not merely a name change, but a change of focus -a focus that departed from a unique vision, to one dominated by a vision of popular culture. Prior to the name change, the museum had been devoted to showing the very best in craft media. Now, with the name change, its focus has become so broad and so encompassing that it now runs the risk of focusing upon nothing by including everything.

But if one thinks for a moment, the concept behind this change is the perfect summation of the 21st Century shift in thinking, where a beautifully designed teapot by Michael Graves is not capable of pouring properly. Designers have assumed the role of tastemakers. They become corporate brands and craftsmanship, with it's implied discipline and profound respect for function, is relegated to an earlier time. Crafts, in this way of thinking, is outmoded, much like the buggy whip was outmoded when the first Model T rolled off the assembly line.

I guess the Museum of Arts and Design thought that if an institution was to be viable in the 21st century, it had to compete with the superficial aspects of popular culture. Then and only then, if the institution was imaginative, and under the guise of entertainment, could those who ventured in be led gently to deeper considerations. I hope there will be deeper considerations. But there is the very great likelihood that instead of competing with popular culture, it will be absorbed by it.

I might point out that this trend is not unique, nor is it necessarily undesirable. Indeed, in the last decade, a whole host of museums, largely in Europe, have changed their names to include the word design. It is easy to see why. There is money to be made in the involvement with popular culture, and money is often seen as the root cause of shifts in vision. The evidence that Design is a money word abounds. For example, the London Times recently reported that a surge of interest in design, triggered in large part by television, is bringing "record financial returns for the more than 32,000 people in England who make their living through craft

forms such as ceramics, textiles and furniture building."

Ultimately, the hand made object is, somehow, the authentic object. So the handmade will always be around because it is the Real thing, and when you buy it you are buying a bit of culture. It is like the difference between FAST and SLOW food. SLOW implies concern, dedication, selection, a deliberate and disciplined expenditure of time and effort. FAST implies stamping out with little attention to those subtle features that mark each effort as a unique expression. For example, when the ceramic artist, Dorothy Hafner, became the designer, Dorothy Hafner, and sold the designs for her beautifully crafted dinnerware to Rosenthal China to produce in quantity, the result looked dull, lacked texture, and had lost much of the feeling and charm of her handmade objects. The fact that her original pieces are still eagerly sought after and command high prices is testimony to the fact that people still want the real thing and will pay for it.

The stamped out cookie-cutter design as the model for the successful corporate institution is not new. Walt Disney established it over fifty years ago when he began construction of Disneyland on July 21, 1954. And it has remained a successful model precisely because it entertains and educates and attracts a mass market. It is the archetypical theme park - understandable and enjoyable at many levels by people of all ages and from many cultures.

Seen in that light, what we have here at WOCEF is a similar model applied to the field of ceramics. Millions of people from around the world have come to this location to view ceramics precisely because there is something here for everyone - from the youngest child, to students, to the highest levels of scholarship - there is broad attraction. Boating, picnic areas, vendors, hiking, kiln firings, artists' demonstrations, symposia, books and catalogs are all available within an environment that is attractive and fun. Biennial competitions attract on a worldwide basis and constitute one form of effective outreach program.

Now as this institution matures, another form of outreach will manifest itself - cloning, wherein the museum will replicate itself in other locations, much as the Guggenheim has and others are contemplating. Taking the lead from corporate culture, this cloning will occur in one of two ways: either first, by building replica institutions often in out-of-the-way places, or second, through mergers and acquisitions with established institutions.

Such multi-headed museums will garner greater financial power for acquisitions and will achieve economies of scale as redundant staffs and services are eliminated. Also, as the New York Times recently noted, by building new structures there is more space to provide viewing for the many objects currently held in storage and rarely seen.

I'd like to talk about another professional institution, one located in the United States. It is called NCECA. NCECA stands for National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts. It is an organization with 3300 members engaged in a variety of activities related to Ceramics. It performs a number of functions -conducting artist demonstration workshops, providing a venue for lectures and panel discussions, sponsoring numerous exhibitions of established and emerging artists, and providing an annual convention for the dissemination and the exchange of ideas and commercial exhibits.

But, in the 21st Century, is that enough? When the world is changing so rapidly, does it suffice to conduct business as usual? It seems to me that to remain viable, NCECA must expand its mission. It must initiate a more innovative program for the continuous education of the general public on the importance of ceramics. It must become proactive by becoming a powerful lobbying force to maintain Ceramics education in the public schools, and to constantly reinforce the importance of ceramics as a major three dimensional activity that students can experience in the classroom -to combat the afore-mentioned flattening of experience that our world has created and continues to create.

I might point out at this juncture that the Cleveland Plain Dealer recently reported that: "Students with high levels of 3-dimensional arts participation outperform 'arts-poor' students in virtually every important measure." They noted that research had "begun to document the impact of three-dimensional arts on learning and had linked arts-based education, in general, to the development of basic cognitive skills, skills used to master other subjects such as reading, writing and mathematics."

The work that NCECA does is good and useful. What I am saying is that organizations, after a while, tend to become bureaucratic and fight to maintain the status quo when all is changing around them. If NCECA is not to go the way of the buggy whip it must reinvent itself as a powerful national force in support of ceramic education.

As an aside, I might point out that as far as I can tell, the same bureaucratic inertia (more or less) seems to prevail in most craft councils throughout the world. Little money is spent to educate the public on the value of their members' artistic output.

Moving on now to another arena, the 21st Century is witnessing the continued worldwide growth of craft fairs as a major vehicle for the marketing of ceramic art. Craft fairs constitute a form of entertainment, they are a destination, they attract ever-growing numbers of people, and though many of the attendees are there just for the entertainment, statistically, a certain percent buy and that means increased sales. And those that do not buy cannot escape becoming educated and thus have the potential of becoming future buyers.

It is all part of a growing trend toward mixing entertainment with sales. This is related to the demise of art movements and the rise of art markets. Craft fairs range from the high end -such as the SOFA shows in the United States or the new Collect show at the V and A in England -to the local craft fair where the works of local emerging craftspeople are shown. It clearly portends a growing trend away from the bricks and mortar associated with the craft store or gallery. And, as usual, it is driven entirely by economics.

This movement away from the high-rent district is reinforced further by the Internet. Many crafts people have established websites for themselves. The Internet Store concept is well established and will continue to replace the physical store.

Further, Internet sales have been enhanced by the development of the exploding Internet auction website, where collectors compete with one another to purchase all sorts of objects, including ceramic objects. Indeed, there are now established auction sites devoted exclusively to ceramic sales. This feature will expand in the future -clearly putting into question the continued viability of the traditional art

auction venue.

I can recall, on a personal basis, as a collector of art deco porcelains, years ago visiting out-of-the-way dealers where, more often than not, I could expect to find some choice pieces. These dealers occupied booths in small antiques malls in rural towns. Many of them are gone now, the dealers finding it more profitable and convenient to simply offer their pieces for sale on the Internet -where more potential buyers can be expected to view their offerings in a day than would come to visit in a year.

As the Internet expands, the aftermarket, so often the major source of income for fixed galleries, will also be supplanted. Collectors from all over the world will have instantaneous alerts posted to their email whenever the work of a given artist or manufacturer comes up for sale or auction in any market.

It would seem to me the field of ceramic art has many possibilities for organizing an entire industry around Internet sales. If the galleries do not take the lead in this, they, too, will be forced to close and instead take "their show on the road" and only attend the major craft/arts shows. Actually, this is not the future, it is happening now, driven by the high costs associated with fixed rents.

So you can see that money, politics, and globalization all come into play continuously to shape the future and that the Internet will be one of the dominant institutions of the future. One of the major reasons for this is that democratization of the Internet frees it from these external influences. Individuals with meager financial means can compete with corporate wealth and power globally because the Internet does not depend upon money or power or geo-politics. Merit and creativity have a chance. Works of art need not be selected by committees or gallery owners nor need they be censored. Conflicts of interest vaporize, and what we are left with is a new culture. Unrecognized as yet by the many, but soon to dominate.

In the context of what I have just described, I wish now to talk about a new Museum of Ceramic Art being proposed for the city of New York. It is called, MOCA -NY.

First of all, it is clear that any urban institution in the 21st Century must demand a compelling presence. That means that the building, itself, must become a destination. Its architecture must be world class. The Pompidou Center in Paris is a prime example.

The next important function of a new museum of ceramics is the extensive use of computer technology interacting with 'real objects' to educate and entertain the public. Using techniques developed originally at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, an interactive science museum, MOCA-NY will involve the attendee in a fun-filled and educational voyage of hands-on discovery.

The museum must initiate and be part of a global consortium of Ceramic Museums, each of which will be originating shows and traveling them throughout the consortium. In this way, for example, a show originating from Icheon could be expected to travel to a half dozen venues around the world.

But it would be more than just a show of ceramics, because a show originating from Icheon and shown at MOCA -New York, for example, would be accompanied

by Korean Food, dancing -the entire panoply of Korean culture. And this is what would attract the audience.

Outstanding curators from around the world would be encouraged to take chances at MOCA-NY. There would be no shunning controversy - political correctness would have no venue at such an institution.

As part of its responsiveness would be the requirement that the museum re-examine its function and purpose every ten years by bringing in museum directors of acknowledged innovative museums to examine, needle, prod and make suggestions for ongoing change.

Since, in the 21st Century, entertainment is the key, consultants from all the major entertainment media would be encouraged to provide continuing updates regarding latest advances in the entertainment field -from new multi-media presentations to new forms of signage- any technology worthy of consideration.

An on-line museum would be established, with three-dimensional portrayals of works provided from an infinite database of the world's ceramic objects -a project as ongoing and Herculean as the deciphering of the Genome or the recent Google proposal for putting all the world's un-copyrighted books online. This global access to the world's ceramic images, backed by a comprehensive and appropriate search engine, would provide students and scholars an unrivaled source of material.

And more. The ceramics industry would be invited to demonstrate, on an ongoing basis, the myriad contributions being made by their technology to the 21st Century - from ceramic engine blocks to porcelain surgical tools to optically flat planes for use in electron microscopes.

The museum would publish an online journal of Ceramic Criticism, where writers from around the world would be invited to make contributions within a peer-reviewed environment known for its excellence of scholarship.

In this regard, let me point out that a body of contemporary ceramic criticism can only develop if critics are encouraged to take positions. This has often been a contentious issue in the magazines that specialize in ceramics because of the desire not to offend the galleries that take advertising space in those publications. This conflict of interest has also been shown to exist in certain books on contemporary ceramics that are, in reality, nothing more than thinly disguised forms of gallery self-promotion.

The museum and its support for the Internet would provide a democratization of criticism by supporting a space for opinions offered online and the encouragement of widely-read critical blogs. Further, reviews of shows would quickly be passed via list serves. One example of this is the clay list serve supported by Eastern Kentucky University.

A museum of ceramic art must support any and all attempts to create scholars, for it is only when the mass of material is organized in a meaningful way to show its place and relevance in the history of ideas does its value to society become clear.

Accordingly, the museum would interact with universities to become part of the

training for future curators, administrators and critics. With many world class educational institutions nearby -such as New York University's Institute of Fine Arts and The Bard Center for the Decorative Arts- the opportunity for positive collaboration generating educational opportunities for students who have elected to make ceramic art their specialty abound.

These are just a few examples of the ways in which a museum of ceramic art can be responsive to the needs of the twenty-first century.

Finally, as a university professor, I would like to raise some ideas about the future for ceramic art within institutions of higher education. Traditionally, art students focused upon their selected medium of expression. One was a painting major, or a graphics major, or a sculpture major or a ceramics major. But in the last 15 years there has been a shift in thinking about how artists are to be educated. Today the single medium and its tools of artistic expression are de-emphasized as students are encouraged to think of such tools as secondary to serving the themes and ideas they wish to develop. Multi-media expression, aided by rapidly growing technologies, now serve as the tools for artistic expression -and will continue to do so in an ever-expanding way.

Students at my university experiment with a wide variety of technical possibilities as they move freely around the art department working with whatever technique or techniques best convey their ideas.

Demarcations, for example, between photography and painting have long broken down and issues such as colonial/postcolonial, gender studies, and critical theory have radically infiltrated art making. Computers now become the starting point for many two-dimensional as well as three-dimensional ideas.

These changes have been gathering momentum at art schools around the United States as institutions re-define the place of material in a dematerialized cultural world of art production. I contend that the newest, strongest work is a reflection or outgrowth of the restructuring of the thinking in the art schools in America -an environment where social and cultural statements in art have become standard Postmodern practice.

I have discerned four distinct categories that have emerged from this new way of thinking. These reflect ways of working that are independent of the medium but so clearly apply to clay. They constitute one way of conceptualizing the efforts of artists. They are, without explanation or expansion:

- 1) Cultural, Political or Social Commentary
- 2) Installation
- 3) Figuration
- 4) Process /Function

Also, from my vantage point as a professor, it is clear that many in the new generation of artists do not come from formal clay teaching environments. Their multi-dimensional training and artistic goals have led them to clay.

Technology permeates the work of these younger artists. One example would be Xerox images (iron oxide used in the ink) that can be applied to any glazed surface

and fired in a modern version of the decal process. Fusing photo images onto clay without the laborious process of creating photo-decals facilitates endless narrative possibilities.

Another would be the innovation and widespread use of Paper Clay -which has enabled and perpetuated the making of large-scale work while, at the same time, forgiving faulty craft practice.

Advances from industrial research are beginning to infiltrate studio practice, enabling new equipment to change fabrication. One example would be the use of non-water-based clay, ram-pressed into molds, allowing the making and firing of an object to cone 10 in a matter of hours.

Clay has been moved to a point where it is used for content and acknowledged for the issues it can convey. So, for example, we find a conceptual based work using stacks of dishes for visual surprise and altered sensibility or an arrangement of teapots in which spouts are anthropomorphized into sexual engagement.

Major themes are reflective of post-modern themes in art generally: gender and identity issues, design, narrative issues, environmental and social concerns, war, politics and the human condition, popular and material culture.

There are strong tendencies to coalesce issues-- art and life, high and low art, the incorporation of craft practice into the fine arts, and the participation of the viewer in interactive work.

As you can see, this is a time for great opportunity and we, in clay, must bridge the gap, with one foot firmly in the classical field of the well-made vessel and the other in the most avant-guard of sculptural arenas. It is truly an exciting time and I, for one, am delighted to be a part of it.