

# Craft at a Crossroads

Once relegated to a sub-art classification, today contemporary craft is finding a place in the world of high-end design. *by Amy Hall*  
**“Craft” can be a tricky word.**

For many consumers, it evokes memories of popsicle sticks and glue guns or poorly cross-stitched potholders hawked at local church bazaars. Loaded with such unsavory connotations, the term even began disappearing from the titles of national institutions: Where New York City's American Craft Museum once existed, the Museum of Arts & Design now stands.

This simple yet obviously significant name change represents just one manifestation of the age-old debate between art and craft and, now, design—three constantly evolving concepts that have, despite shared similarities, become sharply demarcated.

Nineteenth Century art critics and writers used the word “craft” to denote more functional works, while “fine art” described the purely decorative fields of painting and sculpture. Always linked to worldly, material objects, craft naturally ranked lower in the aesthetic hierarchy than fine art, assumed to carry greater philosophical meaning. Later, practitioners of both sought to separate their work from the commercial world of design and manufacturing.

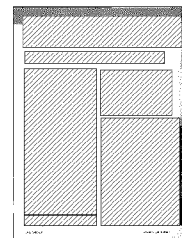
Though the debate remains passionate (and probably always will), the boundaries between art, craft and design today are thickly blurred: Art is created through craft, and design has become an art in and of itself. The phenomenon is especially evident in the labels today's creators, particularly the newest generation, adopt. “For years, a craft artist said, ‘I’m a jewelrymaker, or I’m a ceramicist,’” says Julie Farr, Executive Director of the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft. “The younger generation is crossing all the boundaries, and they’ll just say, ‘I’m an artist.’”

## WHAT IS CRAFT?

Though art and craft have merged in many ways, the urge to define and differentiate the terms remains. Even experts like Kristin Shiga, Gallery Director at Portland, OR's Museum of Contemporary Craft, who dismiss the need for such a distinction, still recognize that it would be disingenuous to suggest art and craft are entirely similar beasts.

Historically, craft has been tied to five traditional mediums: glass, ceramic, metal, wood and fiber. Today, alternatives like newly popular recycled materials are more readily accepted, as long as the end product's techniques and processes adhere to tradition.

There was a method behind the appellation of those 19th Century art critics, Shiga notes. “Craft implies that there's a level of making, a level of *craftsmanship*,”



she says. "When you talk about art, it's more about the final image, especially the meaning behind it. Craft may carry a great deal of meaning, but the process is what's most integral to the finished product."

The most fundamental building block of craft's definition, however, is its handmade aspect, says the American Craft Council's Mary Fichter. "Whatever material you choose to use, it must be manipulated by your own hand. But we are always considering what craft means. We focus on making sure there are enough touchpoints for the public to experience craft, and then they can come up with their own definition."

#### CRAFT: A HISTORY

According to Shiga, indigenous peoples around the world invented the earliest forms of craft. "Very early in history, people were making tools, flatware out of wood or stone," she says. "Those are the very beginnings. When people started to imbue those items with aesthetic quality and even started to differentiate between cultures, those are the roots of the craft we know today."

Our modern conception of craft emerged at the turn of the 20th Century, when the Arts & Crafts movement rebelled against the Industrial Revolution and its "soulless," machine-driven production processes. Under the tutelage of such savants as William Morris and Gustav Stickley, craft's emphasis on masterful handiwork and the highest quality was truly realized.

A similar search for authenticity drove the resurgence of craft in the United States during the turbulent 1960s and '70s, as the practice gained momentum when soldiers returning from Vietnam began taking advantage of the GI Bill. "[These men] didn't want to use their VA benefits to take accounting classes, so they took art classes," says Wendy Rosen of the Rosen Group, which produces the Philadelphia Buyers Market of American Craft. "The expansion of the academic world also meant an expansion of the academic world of art."

Still another chapter in craft's evolution is being written today by an "indie" do-it-yourself movement that is spurring the proliferation of creative cooperatives and marketplaces like [www.etsy.com](http://www.etsy.com). These enterprises are flourishing, thanks in part to a simultaneous, growing emphasis on supporting communities by buying local, sustainably sourced goods.

And, just as in the '60s and '70s, conflict continues to affect our view. "After 9/11, look how well places like Home Depot did," Shiga says. "People wanted to settle in and make their homes homey, and craft is a huge part of that because [it] is all about quality of life. Drinking coffee out of a handmade cup has a very different feel than drinking out of something you bought at Target."

#### SELLING CRAFT TODAY

Home furnishings folks know that in this era of individual expression, every customer is searching for something truly unique. Handmade and often one-of-a-kind, craft naturally fulfills this desire. "Craft is so much about identity," Shiga says. "In the beginning, each culture had to make its own tools and clothes, and that's how cultures, and people, defined themselves over time. Today, every purchase you make doesn't just support an artist, it helps define your life."

As art, craft and design reach an exciting junction, today's craft artists are

creating products that look just as at home in a furnishings and accessories store as they do in an art gallery. Says Chris Maxson of Idyllwild Gallery of Fine Art, a contemporary craft shop in Idyllwild, CA: "Don't let anybody kid you; this is home decor. I have people who bring in swatches and pillows and paint samples. Thirty percent of my income is custom design commissions for homes."

What's more, because craft places so much emphasis on quality and skill, "you know you have something that's going to last," the American Craft Council's Fichter says. "It's almost like an heirloom because it will be passed down from generation to generation."

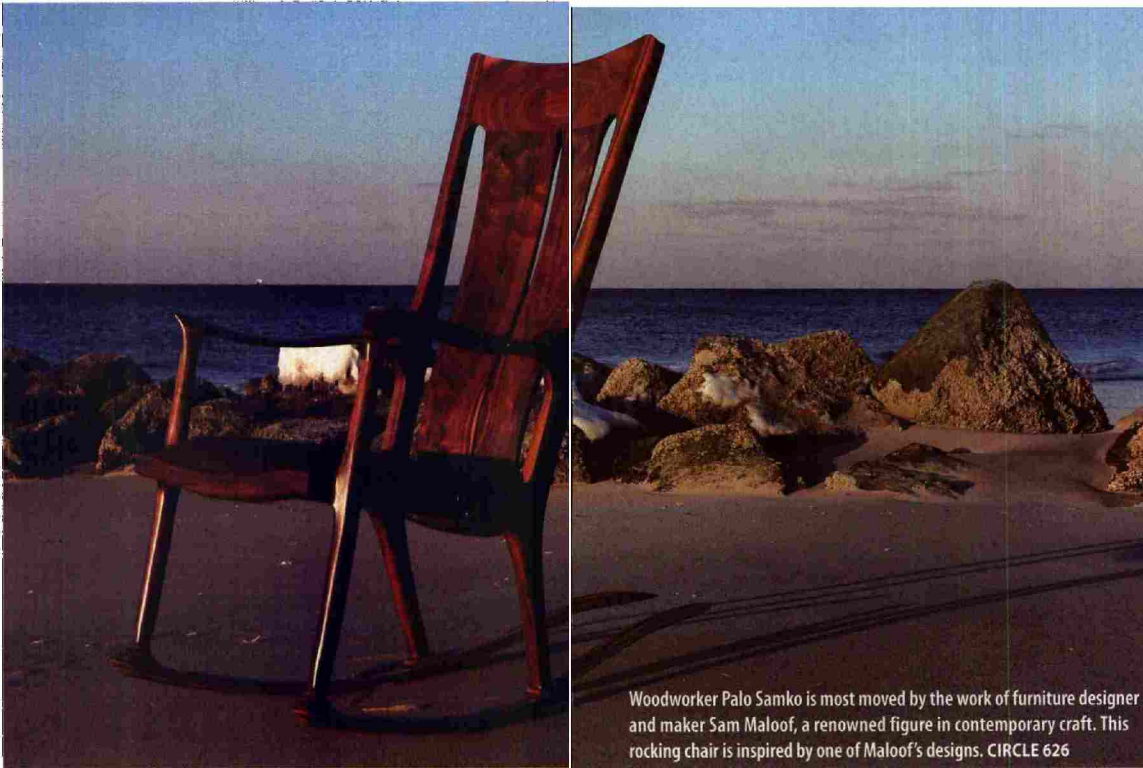
With such glowing reviews, craft is ever more enticing to the modern home decor retailer. The next pages highlight some especially intriguing artists, but first, a few tips on bringing contemporary craft into your store:

**Find your resources.** The United States' two main wholesale craft markets are the Philadelphia Buyers Market of American Craft and the American Craft Show in Baltimore. These are both great places to discover many artists at once, and they provide a good introduction to the contemporary craft world. Looking for something more local? Diane Sulg of Charlotte, NC's Maddi's Gallery recommends perusing your city's street fairs.

**Tell a story.** Handmade crafts carry a higher price than mass-produced goods, so it's important to sell the story of both the artist and the work. In addition to making it part of her pitch, Sulg makes sure most Maddi's Gallery crafts come with informational cards, which are especially good for gift-giving, and Idyllwild's Maxson labels all of her pieces with the artists' names to foster a connection between the human being and his or her work.

**Get customized.** Since crafts are individually handmade, the possibilities for custom designs are endless. "When you come to a craft gallery, you're seeing the tip of the iceberg," Maxson says. Adam Winer of American craft retailer ArtCraft agrees: "Sometimes people need a larger size or a different color, and our artists can do that. You just can't find that at a traditional retail outlet."

**Have patience.** There's a reason artists are known stereotypically as bad businesspeople, Winer says. It's partially true. Plus, he explains, "you have to remember that you're dealing with one artist with a personal life, which means family emergencies and getting sick and going on vacation. They can't just keep running like a manufacturer can." The good news, according to the Rosen Group's Wendy Rosen: Unlike many manufacturers' sales reps, who favor their biggest moneymakers, artists care sincerely about your long-term success because their livelihoods are also at stake.



Woodworker Palo Samko is most moved by the work of furniture designer and maker Sam Maloof, a renowned figure in contemporary craft. This rocking chair is inspired by one of Maloof's designs. CIRCLE 626