

What museums do with objects

The craft object of today becomes the decorative art object of tomorrow in museum collections around the world. Is it important to know what that object is made of and what it was used for, asks Jonathan Sweet? And why do we choose one thing and not another?

Museums in Australia vary enormously in size, style and content, but they generally share a common purpose, which is to offer opportunities for people to engage with cultural material, including decorative arts, craft or design objects.

All volunteer or professionally managed museums contain things that can be seen as craft. Just look around your local historical society collection – there are usually handmade textiles and furnishings on display, legacies of the endeavours of previous generations of industrious folk. There is sometimes so much of this type of material that it is often unclear what purpose it serves.

In regional and suburban local government galleries and museums, there are very considered collections of historic and contemporary craft. Some of these museums have very narrowly defined collecting boundaries, which are often most evident in collections that have been developed on the basis of particular materials. For example, one regional gallery in New South Wales collects glass,¹ and one in Victoria collects ceramics² and another textiles.

This may be an historical legacy from the 1970s, but beyond economic and political expediency it is puzzling that we should continue to think that particular regional communities should have any special affinity with a particular material. Do the people of Shepparton all identify with clay? Equally, it may be timely to ask why we continue to sanctify the geographical separation of works by material, when we live in an increasingly hybrid world. Do material-based regional collections of contemporary craft really make sense any longer?

Other regional and metropolitan museum collections have been formed around specified cultural or geographical groupings. Museum Victoria has reconfigured previously taxonomically-ordered collections of Australian Indigenous and Pacific Island material on this basis. There is an extensive collection of Tasmanian craft in Launceston, and an inspiring collection of twentieth-century Scandinavian design located in Hamilton, of all places.

In our state art galleries you see the same types of objects, where they are chronologically arranged with encyclopedic ambition by recognisable style. At the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, the international galleries are perhaps the most sumptuous recent incarnation of the willingness to accept that handcrafted objects usually existed alongside paintings, and that we can interpret everyday things as part of the discourse of art history.

Unlike contemporary craft, it is probably easier for historical decorative arts to be interpreted in this way because many of these objects already have a parallel life in the secondary marketplace. Perhaps that is why, at the National Gallery of Victoria: International, there are very few items on display from the decorative arts collections that appear to be valued for anything other than purely formal aesthetic reasons. Surely many of these objects had an interesting life before they were acquired?

Although the category 'contemporary craft' is absent from the National Gallery of Victoria's collection policy, this is probably not a bad thing. In this context the people who make things that

resemble craft are better off being acquired as artists on the basis of the strength of their ideas and participation in a critical discourse, rather than for their technical skills alone.

Many museums have acquired, preserved and interpreted decorative art, craft and design objects. And they have used classification to bring order to their operations and policies to provide a guiding logic to the development of the collections and their interpretation. Specialist museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, were established in the mid-nineteenth century for the promotion of design. The classification system and operational structure used there was mostly materials, based around departments such as 'the Department of Ceramics and Glass'. This has left a binding legacy.

In some ways the National Gallery of Victoria's more open policy recognises the hybrid nature of contemporary artistic practice and, to some extent, addresses the rigidity of criteria. However, when it comes to museum categorisation there is less room for poetics: if it looks like a pot it is a pot, and into the decorative arts collection it goes on utilitarian grounds. So, do we need new ways of organising our collections to accommodate the diversity of craft practice? Perhaps we need to de-materialise our cataloguing, and frame objects according to ideas?

Whether or not they are classified as decorative arts, craft or design, our museums are full of things that we have agreed have some kind of value. For historical and cultural reasons, we have assumed that all the resources that collections of objects require for their preservation are well spent and lead to social benefits. But is this the case? According to the International Council of Museums, by definition a museum is 'in the service of society and of its development'.³ How does the craft contained in our museums actually serve society?

The values of craft

Objects classified within the decorative arts matrix often have an association with the everyday lives of people. Variables such as class or ethnicity will account for the diversity of objects, but even so these objects are usually utilitarian things with a function other than a purely aesthetic one. They are often household items such as glass drinking vessels, ceramic vases or easy chairs, and they are in our museums because they have been assessed as being of some significance. They are either special for some reason, or typical of a broader phenomenon.

In either case the selection is made within a particular intellectual or disciplinary discourse. The elite contemporary art/craft objects most easily accommodated in art galleries may engage

with important ideas or issues. Historical items may be of a particular style or associated with historic events of some importance.

In other words, these objects ought to have identifiable historic or aesthetic values and, in some cases, intangible values, such as the techniques and know-how that are evident in craft skills. Often, really interesting objects embody all these values. These are the objects that we, as a society, want to keep because they embody ideas, memories or meanings that particular communities or, in some cases, perhaps our society as a whole, continue to value. The key thing about these objects is that we have come to value them for all sorts of reasons and therefore they can be very ambiguous.

However, a museum's interpretation ought to filter the ambiguity, and in Australia the promotion of the values we associate with the decorative arts, craft and design have been well served at a high level in recent years. Notable are key exhibitions such as *Material Culture* at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and *Inspired! Design across time* and *Smart works: design and the handmade* both at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. Each of these exhibitions was the result of serious curatorial ambition to contextualise objects within particular critical frameworks and to bring underlying values to the surface. There is more on the horizon, and I hope this will also be the case with the National Gallery of Victoria's 2008 winter blockbuster *Art Deco*, the core of which is coming from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Shaping engagement

Museums are distinguished from other cultural organisations, such as sports and entertainment bodies, because of their role as places concerned with the preservation of cultural material and the communication of its significance. Through this, museums effectively serve at least some people who participate in our society and, in turn, those people can influence the shape of visitor experiences, through their consumption of culture.

There have been efforts to broaden the appeal of museums and to engage with visitors in other ways. You see the results of this in new museum architecture, where in some cases all-purpose function spaces dominate the ordering of the interiors. It is also evident in the stated values that underpin some museum strategic plans. For example, the Australian Museum, Sydney (where, surprisingly perhaps, 'contemporary art and craft form an increasingly large proportion' of the collections⁴) states that, 'We seek to be willing to use humour and not take ourselves too seriously'.⁵

If we follow a consumption-led model of cultural production, then we ought to end up with the kind



▲ Brian Hirst, *Flat form – Teal*, 2001, blown glass with gold, silver and copper foil. Collection of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Photo: courtesy National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

▼ Janet DeBoos, *Large vase*, 2001, glazed porcelain. Photo: courtesy National Gallery of Australia, Canberra



Previous page: *Inspired! Design across time*, detail of *Going global* (including on left, *Design without boundaries: recent international work* with glass table designed by Philippe Starck from France and *Wiggle* cardboard chair by USA-based Frank Gehry). Photo: Sotha Bourn. Courtesy Powerhouse Museum, Sydney

↙ Robert Baines, *La Columbella tea and coffee set*, 1992–94, titanium and sterling silver. Photo: courtesy National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

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The objects that populate the categories of the decorative arts, craft or design are those with which most people are familiar. So there will be plenty of those. Unfortunately, in the heat of our enthusiasm we may also sacrifice the logic of service that underpins our collecting and interpretation.
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< Baccarat Candelabrum and 19th Century Gallery, NGV International. Photo: courtesy NGV International, Melbourne

∨ *Inspired! Design across time*, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. Photo: Sotha Bourn. Courtesy Powerhouse Museum, Sydney

of museums we like, containing objects that will truly reflect our human experiences. The objects that populate the categories of the decorative arts, craft or design are those with which most people are familiar. So there will be plenty of those. Unfortunately, in the heat of our enthusiasm we may also sacrifice the logic of service that underpins our collecting and interpretation.

Ordinary citizens are welcome to help shape their own culture through museum patronage, but perhaps this is an overly idealised view of how museums work. It may give too much weight to the idea that museum programs ought to be responsive to sophisticated market research, and may sideline the important role of scholarly expertise.

Museums have a responsibility to lead as well as reflect popular interests. Interpretation works best when it is selective and explains why the thing on display is significant, why it is relevant, and what values it embodies that our society wishes to perpetuate. That is the way museums serve our society and contribute to its development. Our museums need to be responsive to communities for sure, and visitors need to be active. When the museums we frequent display objects that we do not understand, then we need to make that known. That is the best way to help shape our museum culture.

Robert Bell, Senior Curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the National Gallery of Australia, has written that 'the dilemma for craft artists and designers is finding supportive and

appreciative audiences and clients'.⁶ One way to address this is to ensure that where the decorative arts, craft and design are presented in museums big and small, the underlying values are clearly interpreted and effectively linked to issues that matter to all of us. ■■■■

- www.museum.vic.gov.au
- www.ngv.vic.gov.au
- www.vam.ac.uk
- www.icom.museum
- www.nga.gov.au
- www.powerhousemuseum.com
- www.austmus.gov.au

Jonathan Sweet is Lecturer in Museum Collections in the Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies programs at Deakin University, Melbourne.



1. Wagga Wagga Regional Gallery, NSW.
2. Shepparton Regional Gallery, Victoria.
3. ICOM Definition of the museum, http://icom.museum/hist_def_eng.html, accessed 28 August 2007.
4. Australian Museum, www.austmus.gov.au/anthropology/collections/cultural.htm.
5. Australian Museum Corporate Strategic Plan 2005-2008, www.austmus.gov.au/about/corporate_overview.htm.
6. Robert Bell, 'Material culture. Aspects of contemporary Australian craft and design', www.nga.gov.au/Material/Index.cfm, accessed 28 August 2007.

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Rundle Plaza shop
Ground floor, Rundle Mall Plaza Adelaide
Tel: +61 8 8211 9777

Pauline Griffin is the Sales Director of JamFactory Contemporary Craft and Design, Adelaide.



Background JamFactory exterior. Photo: courtesy the JamFactory
Inset: JamFactory retail shop. Photo: Mick Bradley