

White Paper: Creating an Inventory of Craft in Museum Collections, Chicago 2003

Convened by the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design, University of North Carolina
Prepared by Dian Magie, Executive Director

Prior to the Chicago 2003 SOFA exhibition, a group of craft leaders met to discuss the creation of an inventory of craft in museum collections. This was a component of one of four initiatives identified during the 2002 North Carolina Summit Retreat on Craft charged with identifying initiatives that will advance craft in academia and the curatorial worlds. (Proceedings can be downloaded from www.craftcreativitydesign.org) Edmund de Waal, Senior Research Fellow, Craft Research Centre, The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College and Christine Hennessey, Chief of Art Information Resources, Smithsonian American Art Museum, were invited speakers.

After a welcome by Stoney Lamar, Board President of the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design, Glenn Adamson, provided a brief overview, as an attendee, of the previous two "think tanks" convened by CCCD - the 2002 Summit Retreat on Craft and the following year a retreat on craft publications recommended in the Summit Retreat.

De Waal discussed the current efforts in craft research including creating archives of makers' papers and an inventory of both objects and primary source material through a United Kingdom/European network. Christine Hennessey outlined the history of the Smithsonian inventories of painting and sculpture, how they were created, and most important to this discussion the exclusion of "craft and decorative arts" with other specific categories, from the database and inventories now on-line through the Smithsonian.

The group assembled, in addition to Edmund de Waal and Christine Hennessey, included: Glenn Adamson, Curator, The Chipstone Foundation, Milwaukee Art Museum; Andrew Glasgow, Executive Director, The Furniture Society; Peter Held, Curator of Ceramics, Ceramics Research Center, Arizona State University Art Museum; Stoney Lamar, wood sculptor and Board President, Center for Craft, Creativity and Design; Mark Leach, Deputy Director, Mint Museums, Charlotte; Tina Oldknow, Curator of Modern Glass, The Corning Museum of Glass; Melissa Post, Curator, Mint Museum of Craft + Design, and Davira S. Taragin, Director of Exhibitions and Programs, Racine Art Museum and Dian Magie, Executive Director, Center for Craft, Creativity and Design who facilitated the meeting.

Some cogent points raised in the daylong discussions:

We were reminded that although today the internet is indispensable to researchers and museum conservators, ***digital archiving and database searches have only been in common use in the last decade.***

The Smithsonian American Art Museum's Inventory of American Paintings began as part of the bicentennial in the 1970's. Data was entered into a mainframe computer at the Smithsonian, and paper reports by artists, subject and owners were provided to researchers upon request. Direct online searching was not available until the late 1980s. The museum's Inventory of American Sculpture database began in 1984; and thanks to the Save Outdoor Sculpture! Program (a joint project of the Smithsonian American Museum and Heritage Preservation), reports of over 32,000 outdoor sculpture were added in the 1990s. Both Inventories have accompanying photographic study files. Photographs vary in quality and size. Funding is being sought to digitize these images.

Creating a national inventory is dependent on reports and information that others provide. Many museums, including some of the largest, still do not have a computerized digital inventory. Few museums, if any, have their entire collections fully digitized and available to the public on-line. This can be attributed to human and financial resources for the museum field that has fallen far behind technological advances. Creating an on-line inventory of craft in museum collections will have to involve support in the form of staff and/or project financing to achieve the quality of inventory detail and imaging that will be most helpful to museum curators and research.

Craft is and has always been international. Craft artists have shared their thoughts and practice freely across international boundaries. The creative making of art is an international language. The 20th century history of craft is abundant with artists leaving their native country to study with their counterparts in other parts of the world. A major project of the Craft Research Centre at the University of Surrey Institute is to create a digital archive of European and Scandinavian craft artists, including primary source material, letters and papers valuable for research. In the planning stages at this time as with this United States' effort, it should be the highest priority to coordinate these efforts so that at the very least, there could be an interface in database design.

Points Edmund de Waal made about England could easily apply to the United States. Most craft research has been fostered by a single medium - ceramics, glass, wood, fiber - with almost no contextual work. Tanya Harrod's

The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century is the only overview. (There is no similar text for the United States - identified in the 2002 North Carolina Summit Retreat as the highest priority to advance craft). Scholars, curators, and researchers have been working in a vacuum, often on parallel projects because there was no central clearinghouse and no scholarly journal. There have been extraordinary gaps in knowledge between institutions and curators. Perhaps there is comfort in the knowledge that we are all working from a similar disadvantage. There isn't a clear identification of the organization or institution in the United States to provide the central coordination that the Craft Research Centre is now providing in Great Britain.

For historians and museum curators, the inventories serve as a starting point in locating works for comparative study or exhibition purposes but the experience of the Smithsonian Inventories indicates a larger audience. The Inventories were initially designed to serve curators and museums, but use of the Inventories has expanded, especially in recent years now that the database is now available on line (accessible from the Museum's home page at www.AmericanArt.si.edu). Each year, about 1,500 researchers call, write or visit the Inventory for information. Over 40,000 web searches are logged each month. In 2002, queries were received from 49 states and 14 countries. For students, the Inventories can provide listings of works done by a particular artist or related to a specific theme. Approximately 40% of the users are from research universities and museums, 20% publishers, conservators, educators, and a large number are private collectors and the interested public. The Smithsonian maintains and updates their on-line inventories of 260,000 paintings (American [U.S.] to 1914) and 80,000+ indoor and outdoor sculptures with a staff of two.

In addition to its national inventory databases, the Smithsonian Art Museum serves the public through its popular "Ask Joan of Art" on-line question and answer reference service. Through a form on the Museum's website, anyone can submit a question about any topic on American art and a trained librarian will reply. Christine Hennessey asked staff to pull the type of questions "Ask Joan of Art" has received on craft in recent months. The following are a few of the questions that are interesting to this discussion considering the Smithsonian inventories exclude craft and decorative arts:

1. I am interested in the current distinction between art and craft, particularly fine art and fine craft in terms of how galleries, museums and collectors make the distinction and define/describe the two. I am interested in reading discussions and other resources on this topic.
2. Which artists were responsible for transforming the perception of ceramic works from pottery craft ceramics to fine art or sculpture and when did this major shift take place and where?
3. I am searching for information about the history of wood turning in the U.S. from 1850 to present day.
4. I'm looking for Smithsonian resources for information on pre-Civil War quilt block designs used as secret coding for escaped slaves traveling on the underground railroad.
5. Do you have any information about these artists? Henry Varnum Poor, Peter Volkous, Vivika and Otto Heino, Alexius and Warren McKenzie, Margarite Wildenhain?

A new project of the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, parallels somewhat the video documentaries, archives, papers and collections of the artists being assembled by the Craft Research Centre. Headed up by Liza Kirwin, the project goal is an on-line oral history project of 300 U.S. artists. The archives are actively collecting papers and conducting oral history interviews. Although omitted by design from the painting and sculpture archives, the new project recognized the urgent need to gather information on craft and decorative arts in America. To date, over 50 craft artists have been interviewed; 19 transcripts are available online. The multi-year project will culminate in the publication of an online guide to the papers of craft artists in the Archives of American Art, as well as electronic access to interview transcripts of craft artists. A total of 100 interviews are planned. More about the project, funded by Nanette L. Laitman, can be found on the Archive's website at www.aaa.si.edu.

The Smithsonian example of using community groups, volunteers and interns to collect images and information for their inventories is one way a project with such an immense scope might be tackled. It involves developing a base line, standardized format and even training videos for the subsets identified to collect the information, whether these subsets be organizations, interns or staffing. The standardization of format would be especially helpful for collections that do not have a computerized or digital database such as the Southern Highlands Craft Guild. The Smithsonian staff created a handbook for their efforts to inventory sculpture through volunteers and interns, and a standardized archival information sheet. When spot-checked by professional conservators they reported a 95% rate of the entries checked were correct by their standards.

During the meeting, there were several ***methods identified that could accomplish the desired goal of a digital inventory of craft in museum collections.*** The scope of an inventory could include over 12,000 museums in Association of American Museums, 900 companies and possibly private collectors. The Smithsonian sent out their request for information to these resources and received a 30% response rate when asking for information on sculpture, with the defined criteria that it had to be in a permanent collection or given as a gift in a long-term loan to

the museum. To achieve a similar response rate to surveys of craft in museums will require a high profile and respected coordinating organization. Craft guilds and center could be a valuable resource in this project.

Incorporating existing inventories into a national inventory (or international) may require linking, through the central craft portal, a type of museum bibliography to identify the museum holdings of archives, interviews or other primary source material of a specific artist in addition to work in the collection. The level of digital archiving in the museum world range from none, to paper only inventory, to in-house database, to multimedia digital archival information that includes interviews and interactive educational material (an example is the upcoming Mint Museum of Craft+Design project on the 75th anniversary of Penland School of Crafts). The Corning Museum of Glass is developing a robust digital inventory of their collection but with specific markers relating to the field of glass.

It would be helpful to all museums, for research and publications, to create an ***industry standard for copyright of images.*** This is key to the success of a digital database and inventory but more important for ongoing research and museum publications.

After a central coordinating institution is identified, ***developing a universal language and template for the digital database would be assisted by the convening of a consortia of craft organizations representing different media with an educational mission.*** The initial meeting of the consortia would be able to identify similar projects completed, underway or planned. The Center for Ceramic Research at Arizona State University is in the planning phase of an inventory of ceramics in museum collections. Several attending this meeting thought the Friends of Fiber Arts may have completed an inventory. The Smithsonian began their sculpture inventory with the 14,000 records in the index of the "American Sculpture Files" of the University of Delaware. Building on a base of existing information would be an advantage for the collecting of a craft inventory.

Support for creating the inventory of craft in museum (possibly including corporate and individual at the beginning or later) could be financed through a variety of methods. Foundations such as Pew and Luce have funded similar projects. IMLS funds this type project. A pool of funds could be established through contributions by collectors groups that would provide the funding needed to assist museums in placing their collection and archives on the digital inventory through museum studies interns or staffing needed and/or equipment for standardized high quality digital imaging.

A key question to be answered is the identification of the central craft institution or organization in the United States that will step forward to coordinate this effort as a leader in the craft field. One of the key identifications identified was the American Craft Council as the type of organization capable of engendering a response from throughout the field.

A number of organizations and institutions, although not intended to be exhaustive, were identified that would be helpful in advancing this project both in the United States and internationally. Following the strong recommendation by our colleague from England, the need for an inventory of research material by and about the artists, expands the core consortia to include universities as well as museums. In the United States, some possible consortia contributors identified include the American Craft Council (ACC), The California College of the Arts, The Furniture Society, Craft Organization Directors Association (CODA), the Glass Art Society (GAS), Renwick Smithsonian, National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA), Museum of Art and Design, The Center for Craft, Creativity and Design, the Wood Turning Center, the Ceramic Research Center at Arizona State University, Friends of Fiber Arts, Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG), plus curators from major craft museums.

After hearing from Edmund de Waal of the networking and joint effort of the UK and Europe in an identical effort, the group meeting in Chicago felt ***an important early step would be a meeting with international counterparts to network and coordinate efforts world-wide.*** de Waal reported that Scandinavia may be the most advanced in the effort to create a digital inventory. Other countries that are working on parallel paths include Canada, Japan, Australia, Italy and South Africa. Through the World Craft Council, other countries could be identified with similar projects under way. Craft is and has been international, therefore if a dialogue can be begin on existing and planned projects in the area of research and inventories of craft - the advantages to the field would be immense.

The Center for Craft, Creativity and Design would like to thank the participants of this meeting, the third in a series of described "craft think-tanks" that we hope will identify and advance initiatives important to the craft field.