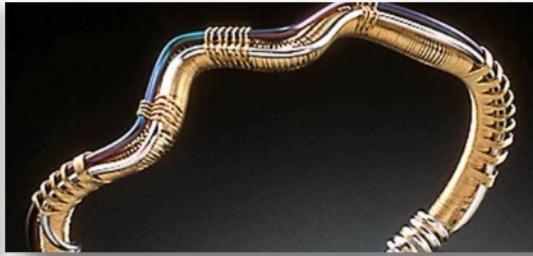


WISCONSIN
DESIGNER
Crafts
COUNCIL
INC.

WDCC

1916 - 2017



The Wisconsin Designer Crafts Council

*Promoting fine craft
and the artists who create it*

The World of Fine Craft

Once upon a time.....everything was made by hand. In distant human history everything was created for purely functional purposes. Cooking and eating utensils, weapons, clothing and shelter were made by and for their creator.



As tribal units grew, so too did the craftsman's skills. Specialization in their craft enabled higher quality

items to be owned by more people, who obtained them through barter and exchange. With advancement and sophistication of skill and design, craftsmen incorporated adornment into their creations. These enhancements differentiated one craftsperson from the next. They also provided prestige and displayed the rank of those who were able to afford more intricate and involved pieces.



The increased wealth across social classes combined with mastery of craftsmen's skills, encouraged beautiful, rich, intricate designs in all craft, including woodworking, metalsmithing, etc. Craftsmanship became extremely prized, culminating at the highest levels as the royal jewels, armor and arms of knights and kings, and the rich tapestries and religious implements of the church. Finely designed and crafted items were sought after, treasured and passed on through generations. Today, memorable works of fine craft from hundreds and thousands of years ago are collected and displayed in private collections and museums around the world.





Throughout the 19th and up to the mid 20th century, fine craft was still revered and sought after. While mechanization introduced during the industrial revolution allowed works to be produced faster, the design and detailed work of high quality fine craft was for the most part still done by hand. A division of labor became common, in which the design of a piece was created by a fine craft artist, while much of the work of actually converting that design

into the finished item was done by others specializing in specific aspects of the art such as finishing, polishing, stone setting, etc. Each such craftsperson was an expert in his or her particular skill, and took great pride in their work.

By the mid 20th century, the movement towards mass production of a limited number of designs accelerated. The obvious advantage was lower price and greater access by more people. The downside was an inexorable move towards a loss of originality, uniqueness and often a lower standard of quality. This had a dramatic affect on the fine craft artisan population, those people willing to spend years learning a craft and perfecting their artistic design skills. An example of this evolution was related recently by a long term member of the Wisconsin Designer Crafts Council, Shelly Culea.

“After graduating from Kansas University with a BFA I moved to Minneapolis in November, 1972 where I got my first job in the jewelry industry. I worked for Kirchner’s Jewelry Manufacturing Company, one of the largest jewelry manufacturing companies in the United States. Approximately 35 jewelers and diamond setters were employed. I was the first woman hired to work in this shop. About 10 months later I left Kirchner’s as I had saved enough money to outfit my own personal jewelry studio. At that time I also started designing rings and pendants for Jewelmount Corporation. In 1974 Jewelmount was the third largest manufacturer of jewelry sold to Department stores. I also had my own line of custom jewelry that sold in the Walker Art Center gift shop in Minneapolis.”

As I look back, for over one hundred years the United States dominated the jewelry manufacturing industry worldwide. Today, Kirchner's and Jewelmount are gone. There are no major jewelry manufacturing companies left in the USA. All mass produced jewelry distributed throughout the United States and the world is now located off shore."

Fortunately, there are still people like Shelly who spend years learning and perfecting both critical aspects of fine craft: **A high level of artistic design coupled with impeccable craftsmanship.** Works that, whether functional or purely decorative, meet the highest levels of quality, beauty and timeliness. The work they produce today is what is given the name, *contemporary fine craft*. Perhaps the best description of a fine craft artist came in a quote by Louis Nizer, noted trial lawyer and author:

"A man who works with his hands is a laborer; a man who works with his hands and his brain is a craftsman, but a man who works with his hands and his brain and his heart is an artist."

The examples below are by artist members of the Wisconsin Designer Crafts Council.



Ann Wydeven



Jef Raasch



Gretchen Lima



Marilyn Leach

A Rich History

The Wisconsin Designer Crafts Council was established in 1916 under the name of the Wisconsin Society of Applied Arts (1916-1936). It was in 1937 that the society adopted the title Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen, and in 1982 became the Wisconsin Designer Crafts Council.

The objectives of this statewide organization were to keep artists informed about the national crafts scene, to provide a vehicle for exhibiting and marketing their work, and to hold meetings with educational components. According to a Milwaukee Sentinel article (September 1916), "New Art Society Is Launched Here," the objectives of the group were "to promote fellowship among the designer craftsmen of Wisconsin; to raise the standards of beauty into objects in common use; to encourage designer and worker into a mutual relationship; and to further and support all branches of applied arts produced in the state."

The Milwaukee Art Institute was the home of the new society and the first annual exhibit was held from November 21-December 11, 1916. Annual shows continued there until 1957, and then were moved to the Milwaukee Art Center until 1974. During this time, annual exhibits also traveled throughout the state.

In the early years, the range of craft work included metal, textiles, basketry, bookbinding, leather, pottery, porcelain, stained glass, illumination and book plates, designs for costumes, floor and wall coverings, architecture, and landscape gardening. Annual exhibitions became a major vehicle for artists to have their work seen by their peers and to be reviewed by prestigious jurors. Opening receptions were outstanding social events that attracted large audiences.

In 1961, the annual exhibit was selected by the Smithsonian Institution as a touring exhibition. In 1962, David Campbell, President of the American Crafts Council and Director of the Museum of Contemporary Craft, New York City, juried the annual show. He commented that the work of Wisconsin craftsmen rated well above average in the national picture.

In 1965, the largest WDCC craft show held at the Milwaukee Art Center consisted of 354 works by 149 artists. As the growing collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum created more demands for exhibition space, new



Morning Glory Fine Craft Fair



Winter Glory Fine Craft Show

venues were sought. Since 1974, the annual exhibitions have been held at prestigious museums and galleries throughout the state, the most recent held at the Museum of Wisconsin Art in West Bend.



WDCC has made significant contributions to the development of 20th century American crafts. Numerous Wisconsin craft artists who were affiliated with the organization in its developing years and up through present day have become nationally known. Today, members continue to enjoy the opportunities and support that WDCC provides. Media represented include ceramics, fiber, enamel, glass, jewelry, leather, metal, photography, wood, sculpture, handmade paper, and mixed media.

The biennial exhibition continues, along with a variety of other special events held during the year, including the Morning Glory Fine Craft Fair and the Winter Glory Fine Craft Show and workshops and seminars to keep members abreast of developing craft trends and connected to their

colleagues. An enthusiastic Board of Directors meets bi-monthly to carry on this important legacy of maintaining excellence in fine craft work. WDCC raises public awareness and knowledge of Wisconsin's strong crafts tradition by making accessible the best in contemporary and traditional crafts, and by educating the public to the value of crafts in today's society.



Studio tour

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