

Crafts Event

LEISURE & ARTS

American Crafts Shine, in White House or out

By BARBARA JEPSON

Washington

The colored-glass screen that Chester A. Arthur commissioned for the White House from Louis Comfort Tiffany was ultimately sold at auction. The Appalachian textiles displayed by Ellen (Mrs. Woodrow) Wilson in the Blue Mountain Room disappeared long ago. And some 1,700 chairs from various presidential interiors have been relegated to a 40,000-square-foot, off-site storage facility. History may sometimes be unkind to presidents, but it tends to treat their home furnishings with indifference.

Yet the objects in "The White House Collection of American Crafts," on view at the National Museum of American Art (NMAA) of the Smithsonian Institution through Sept. 4, have so far received the uncommonly good treatment they deserve. Each of the 72 recent works in clay, fiber, glass, metal or wood reflects the collective achievements of the American crafts renaissance, which began over four decades ago.

Building on the visionary spirit, bold experimentation and hard-won technical breakthroughs of such pioneers as Peter Voulkos in clay, Leonore Tawney in fiber, Harvey Littleton in glass and Wendell Castle in wood, today's craft artists have gone beyond mere mastery of their materials to a level of extraordinary virtuosity. Unlike their predecessors, they no longer look to mainstream art movements like abstract expressionism for inspiration. Instead, they draw on the vast palette of contemporary society.

Ronald Fleming's burl redwood bowl, "New Beginnings" (1993), is fashioned from a log section burned in a California forest fire; the charred areas now provide poignant tonal shading on this lathe-turned vessel's intricately carved leaf fronds. Josh Simpson's "Megaworld"

(1994), a blown and hot-worked glass orb encasing an interior globe, is based on NASA photographs of earth from outer space. And Nathan Youngblood's hand-coiled "Black Carved Jar" (1991) employs traditional Pueblo pottery-making techniques such as the use of pulverized horse manure for oxygen reduction during the firing process to achieve its ebony color. "We call the smell of this Corral No. 5," he explains.

"White House Crafts" was the first of several exhibits conceived by Hillary Rodham Clinton and her advisers to help bring greater visibility to American artists. It recognizes the Year of American Craft proclaimed by President George Bush shortly before he left office. Michael W. Monroe, who recently retired as curator-in-charge of the Renwick Gallery, the NMAA's separately housed contemporary crafts museum, chose the work.



Vase by Sidney R. Hutter

Mr. Monroe's mandate was to select works encompassing the diversity of today's crafts scene—both functional and purely decorative objects from well-known and less established artists. But his choices were limited by the size and scale of the table tops, mantelpieces and other furnishings in the formal period rooms of the White House. It was an opportunity for the curator to play decorator, and he did so with tasteful imagination, favoring works that combined traditional references with a distinctly contemporary sensibility.

Letters sent by the White House asked artists to donate a piece in a particular size, color or series specified by Mr. Monroe for display "in a prominent location in the White House throughout the years." The artists responded generously, and the collection went on view in December, 1993 at the presidential residence, where it was seen by over a million visitors. A handsomely illustrated volume entitled "The White House Collection of American Crafts" has also been published by Abrams in conjunction with the exhibit.

Yet ironically, the collection will not remain at the White House. No one bothered to check the guidelines set by the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, which consider works other than presidential portraits ineligible for acquisition unless the artist is deceased or the work is 25 years old.

Once the Clinton White House learned this, it pursued other options rather than seek an exception to the non-legally-binding guidelines. Instead it waited until January to ask the artists for permission to transfer the donated works to the National Archives for "periodic display" at the future Clinton Presidential Library, where they will be available for loan to museums. A wiser choice might have been to bequeath the collection to an institution with a demonstrated interest in crafts, such as the American Crafts Museum or the Renwick, but Mr. Monroe is not saying so. Having these objects at the Clinton library, he believes, will "expose another segment of our population to crafts, and anything that increases the audience for crafts has nothing but positive ramifications."

In a way, this goal of expanding access to the collection is already being met. At the NMAA exhibit, visitors can either see the objects in the flesh or experience them electronically in an adjoining room via a virtual-reality tour on the Internet (from your home computer access the World Wide Web and type <http://www.nmaa.si.edu/whc/americancrafts>). Although the clarity of the illustrations leaves something to be desired, the on-line option enhances understanding of the collection. Those interested in a particular artist can scroll through a biographical section or click on the "media" category and tour faux studios where digitized, miniature videos show some 29 of the participants at work. They can also view selected objects in their original White House settings, which provides a dual perspective on the collection.

Not surprisingly, some of the works suffer by removal from their White House contexts. For example, David Levi's yellow and blue "Bird Jar" (1993), which interacted so provocatively with the furnish-

ings of the Blue Room, appears prosaic at the NMAA.

Other objects hold their own in either environment. Dante Marioni's "Yellow Pair" (1993), two oversized, blown-glass vessels originally placed in the Yellow Oval Room, echo ancient Greek pottery in their classical lines, yet overthrow tradition in their height and neon yellow color. Cliff Lee's celadon green "Peach Vase on a Pedestal" (1993), a beautiful complement to the Oriental porcelains and furnishings in the pale gray and rose-hued Library, benefits from the opportunity for closer scrutiny. This exquisitely wrought, wheel-thrown vessel has raised designs which were carved with a miniature hacksaw after the porcelain hardened to the consistency of leather. The artist, who discovered a passion for porcelain during his third year at medical school, now does surgery on ceramics. "It's more rewarding psychologically," he says, "and I don't have to worry about being sued."

Even before the White House's bait-and-switch invitation was made known, some of the most prominent artists were apparently unimpressed by the lure of being in the White House collection and did not donate their finest, i.e., most expensive, work. Wendell Castle's whimsical "Presence Clock No. 7" (1990) and Edward Moulthrop's "Rare Ashleaf Maple Spheroid" (1993) are definitely middle-drawer contributions. And the show contains some curatorial missteps—contrived works such as Andrea Gill's silly clay "Pitcher" (1991) and Adrian Saxer's "Untitled Ewer" (1992), an unappealing mish-mash of porcelain, feathers, plastic and a fishhook.

But the majority of objects are high-caliber. Philip Moulthrop redeems the family name with his impressive, lathe-turned "White Pine Mosaic Bowl" (1993); it contains cross-sectioned disks of white pine suspended in black resin, where they float like sparkling coins. Another standout is Sidney Hutter's "White House Vase No. 1" (1993) of laminated, stacked, plate glass. It can be viewed as an homage to cubism or as an eerie x-ray of a vase "skeleton." Sam Maloof contributed one of his inimitable rocking chairs, which appears poised to take flight.

After it leaves the NMAA, the show will travel to at least three additional locations, including the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester in Rochester, N.Y. (Oct. 7 to Nov. 19), the American Craft Museum in New York City (Dec. 7, 1995 to Feb. 25, 1996) and the George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum in Springfield, Mass. (April 4 to June 2, 1996).

Ms. Jepson is a writer in New York.

Letters to the Editor

'Critter' Survey Has No Political Agenda

In response to your June 14 Aside "An Endangered Program?" about the status and future of the National Biological Service. The NBS is not a counting house. We do not propose to count or "catalog all the critters in the country," as you suggest.

The NBS was formed by merging the biological research and analysis functions of various Interior Department programs. This results in more efficiency in the use of the limited scientific resources within the department. It also insulates science from the potentially inappropriate influences of regulatory programs, including the Endangered Species Act.

The work of NBS provides independent scientific investigation and analysis for consideration by decision-makers whose choices may affect future management of lands and their resources. Those decision-makers, in our judgment, include the American public. Therefore, we stress broad distribution and access to the work done by NBS.

A small organization with fewer than 2,000 employees nationwide, we focus most of our work on behalf of other Interior agencies. We also have undertaken cooperative efforts with several states and a few corporate landowners, always aimed at increasing scientific information and its availability.

Above all, NBS is an information resource. Our goal is to increase the degree to which resource decisions are based on knowledge, rather than philosophical or political agendas. We believe that both corporate America and the public at large share that goal.

H. RONALD PULLIAM
Director
National Biological Service

Washington

The NBS ostensibly was created to do two things in particular: catalog the nation's wildlife, and stop redundant, uncoordinated research by Interior agencies. If duplicative research is eliminated, that's a net cost reduction. Moreover, the NBS budget and its staff came virtually entirely from other Interior agencies, so virtually no cost was incurred to create it.

The NBS's mission is fact-finding only. Without data, how can conclusions be reached? Would anyone in business launch a new product without the context market research provides? Mine certainly wouldn't. The data will not only help discern what species are immediately endangered, but also should enable the government to avoid major conflicts over endangered species. If that happens, it's a net benefit to individuals and the economy (plant sitings, business plans, etc.). And I can't imagine any president, regardless of party, who wouldn't want to avoid such conflicts.

As far as the "taking over private property" propaganda in your Aside, that's just politico-speak. I'm a businessman, but don't go treading on the hallowed ground of my favorite pastimes. Like 60 million other Americans I fish for fun, and like many millions I also hunt. We care about things like the Endangered Species and Clean Water acts, but are not radical greenie environmentalists, or whatever term is now in vogue.

JAY C. KUMAR
Director, Publications
Fieldstone Publications Inc.

Washington

Anti-Industry Coterie Stirs Pollution Fears

I write on behalf of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, which represents the interests of Irish business, including the chemical industry. I refer to a June 6 International Page article dealing with the chemical industry in Ringaskiddy, County Cork.

The chemical and pharmaceutical industry is a very important part of Ireland's developing economy. Over the years an increasing number of the world's most important players in the industry have been attracted to Ireland as a result of the unique mixture of skills, incentives and infrastructure—both physical and economic—that is available. Their experience has been uniformly positive and Ireland's economy has also had a substantial and ongoing benefit.

Your conclusions do an injustice to the established industries in Cork—and by extension might damage further investment. There is no relationship between the chemical industry and pollution in the harbor. In terms of license compliance, the Cork pharmaceutical industry is more than 99.4% compliant.

With reference to environmental regulation, Ireland has one of the most stringent regulatory systems in Europe, and rather than dragging its heels, in many cases is far ahead of European Union directives.

JOHN DUNNE
Director General
Irish Business and
Employers Confederation

Dublin

Your article "Irish Town Gets Industrial Revolution, But Pollution and Indignation as Well" is a regurgitation of disinformation regarding industrial development in Cork Harbor. The thesis is developed on what is essentially the view of a small, unrepresentative, anti-industry coterie. The facts about Cork Harbor and its industrial development are very far removed from the picture presented. Your account does a serious disservice to this beautiful area, and to the fine companies from the U.S. and elsewhere that have established much-needed, well-run and environmentally responsible facilities here.

ROBIN O'SULLIVAN
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(Mr. O'Sullivan is a public relations consultant to Pfizer and Sandoz.)

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Skin Cancer Unrelated To Ozone Depletion

In a June 13 Letter to the Editor, Brent Blackwelder of Friends of the Earth asserted that increasing skin cancer deaths have been linked to ozone depletion. This is nonsensical.

Ozone depletion, per se, does not result in increased skin cancer incidence and mortality. It is the fear of an ozone depletion-induced increase in the amount of ultraviolet radiation reaching ground level that is the cause for cancer concerns. But actual ultraviolet measurements show no long-term increase. In the absence of a statistically significant increase in ultraviolet radiation, the chain of causality between ozone depletion and skin cancer is unambiguously broken.

Moreover, malignant melanoma, the type of skin cancer responsible for most skin cancer deaths, has been shown to be largely induced by wavelengths of ultraviolet radiation that are unaffected by the ozone layer. In addition, the increase in skin cancer incidence Mr. Blackwelder refers to has been going on for most of this century, even predating the invention of CFCs and other man-made compounds now blamed for ozone depletion. Also, the long lag time, about 20 years, between sun exposure and onset of skin cancer further rules out ozone depletion as the cause of current cancer trends. Experts believe the increase is due to changing lifestyles, such as more time spent outdoors and population shifts toward sunnier areas, which have led to an increase in the amount of exposure to the sun.

While the increase in skin cancer incidence and mortality is a legitimate public health issue, it has nothing to do with ozone depletion or any other environmental concern.

BEN LIEBERMAN
Environmental Research Associate
Competitive Enterprise Institute
Washington

Atmospheric Pollution Has Declined Steadily

In his June 22 Letter, Dr. Bertram Wolfe states that "each year in the U.S. alone tens of thousands of premature deaths are estimated to be caused by resulting [from fossil-fuel burning] atmospheric pollution."

It would be instructive to see these estimates. In "The True State Of the Planet" (Free Press, 1995) p. 340, Indur M. Goklany, manager of Science and Engineering in the Office of Policy Analysis at the U.S. Department of the Interior, is quoted as follows:

"In the United States, sulfur dioxide emissions per capita are down 60% from the peak in 1920. Both particulates and carbon monoxide emissions per capita have declined more or less continuously since World War II— inhalable particulates down 79% since 1940 and carbon monoxide down 53% since 1945. Volatile organic compounds emissions per capita (contributors to smog) stayed roughly constant between 1925 and 1970, before they declined; in 1992 they were down 36% from the peak. Nitrogen oxide per capita peaked in 1980. It is now down about 10% from its peak."

Ambient sulfur dioxide and particulate matter have been declining for at least the past two decades in most developed countries.

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