

Heartbreaking, Funny, Inventive, Original Cliché: The Tour, Artworks, and  
Craftsmen of OBJECTS: USA

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## Abstract

In 1969, gallery-owner Lee Nordness, together with S.C. Johnson Wax, Inc., created *OBJECTS: USA*, an extraordinary exhibition featuring a variety of contemporary crafts by artisans in the United States. This exhibition toured the U.S. for three years, traveling throughout the country, changing American perceptions of craft and presenting the American public with a new style of art that represented a truly new and innovative American style.

## Chapter 1

### “An Art Program for S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc.”

Since World War II the United States has enjoyed an unprecedented fruition of its national artistic expression. Enlightened people are well aware of the maturity of our music, theater, dance and creative writing; and many American businesses have sponsored, as part of public responsibility programs, our local symphonies, operas and theatre groups. In the 1950's American painting and sculpture reached a level of excellence so that it could hold its own internationally. Again, corporations came to the assistance of this cultural ripening: the movement was lead [sic] of course by S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. with its ART: USA project. Needless to say the acquisition of this collection and its tour not only made the United States and Europe aware of the vigor of our painting, but also well aware of the involvement of Johnson's Wax as a patron in the highest of traditions.

- Lee Nordness, “An Art Program for S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc.”  
February 13, 1968.

While the American public better knew S.C. Johnson for their floor wax in the 1960s, the company also became well known for their support of fine art exhibitions. Gallery owner and studio craft supporter, Lee Nordness developed a close relationship with Mr. Samuel C. Johnson, then president of the corporation, through his gallery in New York City. In 1958 the two worked together closely to produce and develop ART: USA. This widely-celebrated fine arts exhibition traveled to 24 cities in the United States and 16 countries in Europe and Asia. It presented the world with the latest in modern American art. ART: USA changed the perception that fine art worth recognition only came from Europe. In 1968, Nordness realized that American craft was at the same place fine art was ten years earlier and approached Johnson's Wax<sup>i</sup> to continue their corporate sponsorship of the arts. Nordness' introductory paragraph (above) to his proposal

strongly outlined the growth of American craft culture in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and the importance of Johnson's Wax's sponsorship in encouraging and promoting continued growth. America was "wealthy in vitally creative craftsmen" who transformed "the ordinary object into an extraordinary one." Nordness, through his persuasive proposal, convinced Johnson's Wax to be the corporation that reversed the "unawareness of the craftsman as an individual."<sup>ii</sup>

Nordness a "broad-shouldered" and "curt fellow" began his work in the art world as "judge and jury" for artists who brought their work to The Little Studio, a small art gallery in New York City. The Little Studio was an art gallery that was the brainchild of Richard Kollmar, a friend of Nordness' through their mutual participation in amateur stage productions. Their goal was to sell contemporary paintings by relatively unknown artists at reasonable prices, growing the art market and helping artists become "discovered." Kollmar was the monetary support behind The Little Studio, but Nordness was the driving force behind its success. He devised what he later called a "harshly clinical" marketing method, choosing well-painted works that were representative of the contemporary style without being too abstract or "too corny." The small gallery, with its carefully calculated ideas about art and marketing was successful, and by 1955 it opened branches across the country in Chicago, Denver, Cincinnati, and Beverly Hills. Nordness' success with the gallery paved the way for his future successes with his own gallery and larger art exhibitions.<sup>iii</sup>

According to Nordness, his galleries were successful because he followed the secret to selling good paintings, which was to "not charge too much." He

created a “catch-all gallery” where artists from across the country working in contemporary styles could show and sell their work, thus encouraging artistic growth for those outside of New York artistic circles. Nordness eventually took over The Little Studio, purchasing it from Kollmar in the mid-1950s. Around the same time, he learned of America House, the exhibition space started by Aileen Osborn Webb in New York City for members of the American Craftsman’s Council. Concurrently, his reputation grew and he was invited to jury at universities throughout the country and “discovered a more stimulating source of craft vitality,” as he saw craft exhibited with fine art at these exhibitions. In the 1950s, universities were the incubators and nurturing grounds for many studio craftspeople and Nordness experienced these pieces and the changing treatment of materials first hand. Craftspeople in the university setting treated their work as fine art, rather than functional craft, and thus were more interested in working in their own studios rather than working for design firms. Nordness, after seeing the quality that these artists produced, “committed” himself to “promoting this new statement” through his gallery. Furthering his commitment, he also purchased studio craft pieces “from time to time” for his own use, according to his resume from the 1970s.<sup>iv</sup>

Building his business and contacts, Nordness moved from The Little Studio to open the Nordness Gallery on Madison Avenue in 1958 with an expanded roster of artists. That same year, Nordness “conceived and directed” ART: USA: '58, a “tremendous” exhibition held at Madison Square Garden. It showcased Nordness’ ideas about the quality and importance of contemporary



American painting. He believed American contemporary art was equal to that of European art and was determined to bring this belief to others, even if it meant going one city at a time.<sup>v</sup>

ART: USA allowed Nordness to show works by more artists than he was able to in his gallery, which was committed to showing twelve of the “top contemporary American artists.” In 1959, Johnson’s Wax commissioned Nordness to create a project that would promote contemporary American painting on a broader scale than the New York shows. In this iteration of ART: USA, Nordness included a “satellite exhibition” of the craft artisans he encountered through America House and his travels to jury other exhibitions. Nordness had difficulty arranging these objects and received help from the director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, Paul Smith, though the two had never met before. This small “satellite exhibition” and the last-minute assistance of Paul Smith would later prove instrumental in the development of OBJECTS: USA.<sup>vi</sup>

ART: USA, because of its sponsorship by S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. came to be known as the “Johnson Collection.” After its assembly and premier in New York, it toured for two years in the United States and an additional year in Europe. ART: USA caused museum officials and collectors “[realize] the maturity of contemporary U.S. visual arts.” It was the 1959 ART: USA traveling exhibition that began a corporate and personal relationship between Nordness and Johnson’s Wax that was instrumental in promoting OBJECTS: USA and the studio craft movement later in the decade.<sup>vii</sup>

After ART: USA: '59, Nordness returned to his gallery full-time with no intention to produce another large show because his roster of artists was “threatening to leave” if he undertook another ART: USA show. This return proved fruitful for the gallery and over the next few years, Nordness expanded, including adding studio craft to his roster. Additionally, he assembled “an occasional exhibition” of craft. The “fine artists” he represented, according to Nordness, objected even though craft sales were only a small part of the gallery’s business. Nordness felt craft works should be seen, so continued the expansion of the craft section of his gallery. Unfortunately, he was one of the only people who believed craft deserved recognition. Newspapers and magazines failed to send reviewers, with the explanation that no one was qualified to cover this new art direction. The occasional review or coverage would often be found on the women’s pages of magazines. The lack of interest in studio craft did not deter Nordness from continuing to support craftsmen by commissioning them to create works for his home or by exhibiting their works in his gallery.<sup>viii</sup>

Craft exhibitions were not unheard of in the 1960s, but they often had only a few artists and objects. There were a number of collective and collaborative shows, but the “number of individual, one-man shows ... were meager,” according to Nordness. Additionally, these exhibitions were concentrated on the coasts and did not travel to the heartland, leaving craftsmen to languish in anonymity. Nordness best explained how the craftsman was ignored by the general public and the frustration that accompanied it when he stated, “the object was being recognized, but not the artist behind it.” Craft was important as it was

undergoing major changes, and the works were being recognized for this, but unlike other artists, craftsmen struggled for recognition. One historian explained part of this problem came from the ubiquity of handmade crafts such as tie-dyed t-shirts and macramé. These small works “undermined” the skill and acceptance of work by university educated craftsmen. Craft was not considered important to art reviewers, so exhibitions failed to receive recognition in the art pages of national publications. Nordness’ proposal to S.C. Johnson to create another “Johnson Collection,” this time of contemporary craftsmen, educated at universities and taking part in a new form of art creation aimed to change these old perceptions.<sup>ix</sup>

This change in crafts and a new focus on design originated with university education. The number of craftsmen educated at universities grew exponentially after the end of World War II. The GI Bill gave many returning veterans their first opportunity to attend college. While there, veterans often chose craft over traditional business studies and worked in the studios provided by educational institutions. According to Paul Smith, former director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, schools filled the role of patrons for the studio craft movement.<sup>x</sup> The large number of students increased the need for more teachers, which led to students who had just received their training to stay within the university system. This created a craft-focused community that fostered creativity. Students and teachers incorporated ideas from current fine art movements, like abstract expressionism, and the studio craft movement moved away from traditional forms and a focus on function. Craftsmen used traditional

craft media to express ideas in artistic ways rather than through functional pieces for the home.<sup>xi</sup>

The influence of the university and the stability it provided for the growing studio craft movement cannot be overstated. As salaried instructors, craftsmen were free to experiment, as they were no longer dependent on rather than “operating an independent studio” to make a living. They had a “uniquely American attitude” that everything was possible, which freed them to explore ideas and forms separate from function. They found new ways to work with materials or revived old techniques in innovative ways. Craftsmen in the 1960s were aware of the changes happening in society, and freed by their positions at universities, they incorporated these ideas into their work. The university setting freed craft to be art.<sup>xii</sup>

Despite this growth and development in the university arena, craft was not widely recognized or accepted in the United States as an art form. Few galleries devoted space to the crafts. Even with America House and other organizations, such as the Southern Highlands Craftsmen’s Guild, few groups were dedicated solely to promoting studio craft. Even Nordness had trouble convincing his roster of fine artists that there was room for studio craft in his gallery. In this unreceptive environment Nordness hoped to promote studio craft that was equal in quality and style to the fine art produced at the same time.<sup>xiii</sup>

Working against these biases, Nordness hoped that he could convince Johnson’s Wax to purchase the works of sixty artists to promote craft and change the environment. In his proposal to S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc., Nordness argued

that craft made in the United States in 1968 was equal to that made by Cellini, Faberge, and Paul Revere in centuries past. Craft was no longer a hobby or rejuvenating task undertaken by invalids, it was a career. Yet, there was still, as Nordness explained to S.C. Johnson, an “unawareness of the craftsman as an individual.” Names in the fine arts were quickly and easily recognized, such as Warhol and Pollock, but craftsmen still labored under anonymity. Nordness wanted to push the American public to recognize their fine craftsmen as the Japanese did. Pushing for greater patriotism and the idea that Americans were just as good, if not better, than other countries, Nordness wanted to see American craftsmen recognized as “Honored Citizens of the State.” By sponsoring a craft exhibition and promoting it, Johnson’s Wax could be at the forefront of the burgeoning craft movement.<sup>xiv</sup>

In propaganda-like language, Nordness implored S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. to sponsor the show. “The time is propitious,” he stated, “to introduce these remarkable craft objects.” He was convinced that the movement had been housed in the university setting for far too long. The objects, and their makers, needed to be introduced to the United States and the world. The U.S. was capable of producing objects worthy of world recognition and Nordness had “little doubt” that the works would have “instantaneous and widespread” appeal. Appeal that would be “far broader than that enjoyed by music, dance, theatre and the fine arts,” he contended. This exhibition, claimed Nordness, had the ability to reach beyond all traditional boundaries because almost everyone could find a way to relate to craft. “[From] the country storekeeper who whittles a toy...to the

Park Avenue dowager who dabbles with ceramics” almost everyone would be interested in and fascinated by studio crafts.<sup>xv</sup>

Crafts represented a “refinement” of objects used daily and appealed to everyone from the “most sophisticated to the most rustic of audiences.” Nordness’ belief in the universal appeal of craft propelled his desire to see this exhibition undertaken and promoted. His idea would benefit a large number of groups, and sponsorship by Johnson’s Wax ensured a household name would be attached to objects often associated with household use. Nordness wanted to present studio craft in a tangible, accessible way, much as he had done with ART: USA in the 1950s. He believed the “aesthetic power and integrity” of the studio craft movement would reveal the importance of the craftsman in the United States. Nordness wanted to show the strong work produced across craft media and styles because he believed the American studio craftsman had more to offer than most people realized. Nordness, with the sponsorship of S.C. Johnson and Son, Inc, was going to create a new Johnson Collection, this time of contemporary craft. The objects in this collection would awaken Americans to the quality and beauty of art produced by their unknown craftsmen.<sup>xvi</sup>

Nordness originally suggested that S.C. Johnson and Son, Inc. acquire three to five pieces by sixty artists to highlight the best work in a “vital creative field.” Johnson’s Wax would not just promote craft, but they would financially assist the craftsman, by buying the pieces outright, directly from the artist. Through this action, they became a corporate patron and set an example for other companies. By promoting the craftsman through the exhibition’s tour, and—

most importantly—educating “as wide a public as possible,” Jonson’s Wax would be responsible for revealing this “still unappreciated” segment of Americana.<sup>xvii</sup>

The proposal convinced S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. In June of 1969, Lee Nordness, Samuel C. Johnson, and several other prominent public figures, gathered at the Grand Promenade Philharmonic Hall in Lincoln Center in New York for an important announcement. Four months after Nordness’ original proposal to S.C. Johnson’s Wax, the world was made aware of the assembly of a “unique collection of works” of the “nation’s master craftsmen.” Citing the “long...overlooked” craftsmen, now called “artist-craftsmen,” Samuel Johnson was excited to generate interest in the country’s national heritage. To him, the assembly of the craft collection was “indicative of this country’s native cultural wealth,” best “exemplified by the artistic expression of its youth.” This was an exhibition that would not focus on the crafts of the past, but the new crafts of the youth culture on the rise in the United States. Heritage was important, as Johnson noted the role of his father in supporting the arts, but it was also important to encourage the “excellent” cultural development happening in the country. This craft collection would be called OBJECTS: USA: The Johnson Collection of Contemporary Craft.<sup>xviii</sup>

A press release went out soon after this announcement touting this new, exciting collection of studio craft. It was picked up by wire services and articles appeared in newspapers across the country. OBJECTS: USA would be a large, traveling exhibition and would create “increased recognition” for American craftsmen. There would be “greater public awareness” about this new art form

because of this exhibition, the release asserted. The developing youth culture was an important part of the new development in crafts, and Johnson wanted to emphasize this aspect by highlighting artists of the younger, more experimental generation. There would be a full year to assemble the collection, and it would be revealed in the fall of 1969.<sup>xix</sup>

Between June 20, 1968 and fall of the next year, there was much work to be done. Lee Nordness was the man for the job. Johnson's Wax assigned him to select and purchase the works that were to be included. The purchasing of objects was an important aspect of their support to ensure that the artists received appropriate compensation, in addition to recognition, for their work. Nordness, excited to see his plan come to fruition, "applauded the efforts of the Johnson's Wax in pioneering a new field of cultural patronage." As they had for ART: USA, Johnson's Wax set a trend for supporting developing art fields.<sup>xx</sup>

The collection would be broad enough to allow the craftsman to show the "full range of his expression" as studio craftsmen explored a number of media from "plastics to platinum" to design objects from "pots to penthouses." Nordness originally offered to create a list of objects by master craftsmen from his "own experience," but soon realized his contacts and roster were not enough to create as broad a show as he wanted. He soon began working with Paul Smith, director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, to discover more artisans.

Advertisements ran in *Craft Horizons*, articles appeared in national publications, and soon letters poured in to the American Craft Council, the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, S.C. Johnson, and Lee Nordness with suggestions for



artists to be included. Newspaper articles promoting the exhibition after its announcement also drew attention. People wrote in recommending their own work, the work of friends, and the work of craftsmen they knew. Excitement for the exhibition was mounting.<sup>xxi</sup>

Nordness and Smith networked, talked with other gallery owners, gleaned information from the American Craft Council newsletter and traveled the country extensively. Smith and Nordness' travels, which they described as "one one-night stand after another," brought them in contact with both well-known craftsmen of the day and up-and-coming ones. As a result of these encounters, over half of the craftsmen with works in the exhibition were "completely new faces." This combination of familiar craftsmen and emerging ones enhanced the idea that studio craft was growing and on the cusp of truly becoming a new artistic movement.<sup>xxii</sup>

Smith was not paid, but Nordness convinced S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. to donate a portion of the collection to the Museum of Contemporary Crafts as compensation for Smith's efforts. Smith wrote numerous letters to craft makers he knew, asking them for slides of their work, as well as recommendations for who they thought would be best to include in this groundbreaking exhibition. Smith persuaded artists, like ceramicists Edwin and Mary Scheier, to include their works in OBJECTS: USA by promising to select their work for the permanent collection at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts after the tour of the exhibition finished. The Scheiers agreed. Paul Smith was excited to be a part of what he was sure would be a "very successful exhibition."<sup>xxiii</sup>

While Nordness wanted more of the contemporary work being produced, Smith felt it was important to represent the past and show the timeline of development in studio craft. However, without conflict, they found common ground in the development of the collection, and the show, according to a preview article, developed into a “panorama of outstanding work.” It represented the many different styles developed in the various geographic regions of the United States. After their many travels, Nordness and Smith came to the conclusion that there was “no one American style” in studio craft. OBJECTS: USA, while not originally intending to capture this broad lack of style, ended up codifying the studio craft movement as something bigger than material, technique, or style.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The original intent for OBJECTS: USA was to demonstrate the breadth and depth of objects produced by the studio craft movement through examples by a relatively small number of craftsmen. Nordness wanted “major works” that would not depreciate quickly and would be most beneficial to both museums and craftsmen over time, but soon realized he needed a greater number of objects and artists to represent the whole movement. Nordness convinced S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. of this necessity through his “energetic” and “enterprising” manner, according to Paul Smith. While not trained as an artist or art historian, Nordness taught himself about current art trends and understood the business side in such a way that enabled him to convince others of the necessity of the project. Nordness developed a relationship with S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. through the Little Studio, selling them work and discussing décor for their home. This,

combined with his growing presence in the New York art scene as a seller and buyer enabled him to utilize relationships and connections to bring the show together.<sup>xxv</sup>

The original proposal, while small in scope, quickly grew beyond original expectations. Nordness convinced Johnson's Wax, over the course of 1968 and into early 1969, that the exhibition needed to grow to include a larger number of craftsmen. Original choices included craftsmen who were well known in craft circles and had exhibited in shows, but over the year, newer names came to the attention of Nordness and Smith. They went to colleges and spoke with faculty and students; they traveled to studios in remote areas to find work. Over the course of the year, they curated a show that would change America's perception of crafts through its vastness.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Nordness so strongly believed in the exhibition's importance that he was sure it "could tour for ten years." OBJECTS: USA was such a unique show that Nordness was convinced that there would be "few difficulties in booking" venues for it. He imagined that the exhibition would be displayed in major museums to "obtain the proper stamp of approval," and from there move to smaller towns, galleries and even community halls. There was no limit to the reach of this show for Nordness. He believed it had something for everyone and would be welcomed in every town. Firm in his belief that everyone could relate to craft, where they could not always relate to fine art, Nordness sought all possible venues for the exhibition, including college and university galleries. He also looked for museums and galleries in smaller cities, to fulfill his goal to represent

all geographical areas of the country. He did not have to look far for venues to host this groundbreaking exhibition.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Letters poured in from galleries, museums, and colleges asking about the exhibition and when it would come to their region over the summer of 1969. The September 1968 issue of the magazine *Outlook* contained an announcement stating that the Johnson Collection of Contemporary Craft was planning a tour of major museums and galleries. This announcement led to a flurry of letters requesting more information about the parameters for exhibiting the collection. The letters came from colleges like West Virginia University, Stetson University in Florida, and Southern Colorado State College. Robert Warn, director of the Flaten Art Gallery at St. Olaf College in Minnesota was “extremely interested in obtaining” OBJECTS: USA for his gallery’s 1969-1970 exhibition season. Each school wanted to know the availability of the show, the conditions under which it could be shown, and when they could have it in the 1969-1970 exhibition year. Similar letters were sent to Nordness, Paul Smith, Aileen Osborn Webb, then President of the American Craftsman’s Council, Samuel C. Johnson, and his company. The number of people and organizations interested in hosting the exhibition were proof of its broad reach and importance as a craft collection.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Nordness’ prediction for the enthusiasm for OBJECTS: USA was correct. As 1968 moved toward 1969 more organizations wrote for information about the exhibition and inquired if they could exhibit it in their spaces. The Sheboygan Arts Foundation wrote Samuel C. Johnson requesting to be one of the first Midwestern art centers to exhibit OBJECTS: USA. The director, Orrel Thomson,

felt the exhibition would be “a most significant contribution to the Midwest [sic] and the United States on the whole.” He further commended the “farsightedness” of Johnson’s Wax for supporting such an important exhibition. At the same time art centers, colleges, and museums were requesting the exhibition, it was growing in scope to include more artists from across the country. Soon OBJECTS: USA needed more space to show the hundreds of pieces that were now a part of the Johnson Collection of Contemporary Craft.<sup>xxix</sup>

As venues were determined, letters came from collectors and craftsmen with slides to demonstrate the quality of studio craft made across the country. A letter from John L. Stine in Brownsville, Texas to “Johnsons Wax Company” praised the works of ceramicist Guy Cowan. While Cowan was not included in the exhibition, a handwritten note asking him to “send slides” is scribbled in the margins of the letter. No piece was out of the question for consideration in this great collection of the masters of the studio craft movement. Another letter, from William Kirby in California wrote to “call [their] attention to a master craftsman in furniture making” named Robert Burg. Burg, like Cowan, was not included, but these letters demonstrated the passion and connection people who knew craft makers felt about their work. Collectors were interested in seeing works they were familiar with and pieces that defined craft to them. The open call for pieces in magazines and newspapers attracted the general public and ensured that the exhibition would represent craft from all sections of the country.<sup>xxx</sup>

Before the show traveled to any of the venues throughout the United States, Nordness wanted it to open at the National Collection of the Smithsonian

Institution. The Smithsonian, according to curator Lloyd Herman, was “most anxious” to start a permanent collection of studio craft, but had not yet been able to do so. By opening at the National Collection, Nordness would help the Smithsonian gain recognition for supporting studio craft. Additionally, upon the completion of the exhibition’s tour, a number of the objects would be given by S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. to the Smithsonian Institution to begin their craft collection. The exhibition, Nordness stated in his proposal, was “conceived completely as a public service,” and starting at the Smithsonian in the nation’s capital confirmed the importance of public access to the collection. It also solidified the exhibition as truly American. In the nation’s capital with the support of the “Nation’s Attic,” OBJECTS: USA was poised to bring studio craft to the forefront of every American’s mind.<sup>xxxii</sup>

After the pieces were selected, Nordness turned to plans to open the exhibition in Washington, DC. Because of the number of objects and the size of some of them, much work went into determining the space needed for the show. The show had grown from the original estimation of 250 objects to over 500 by 308 artists. The original plan was to arrange the show by media type, but this proved to be too difficult given the size of many of the works and the exhaustive scope of the show. Eventually, it was decided that it would be arranged in a way that made sense in the space—changing in each venue—rather than by media type. Unfortunately, this excessive size led to the rejection of a number of galleries and museums due to lack of space.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The choice of Washington, DC as the starting point was not without importance. As OBJECTS: USA was a representation of all American craft, Washington, DC was neutral ground where all Americans could feel they had a share in it. The nation's capital was "less commercial" and showed the support of all of the regions, not just specific ones, according to letters between leaders at the Smithsonian and Lee Nordness. Nordness invited congressmen from states with the greatest number of craft makers to serve on an "honorary committee." California, New York, Ohio, Washington, and Wisconsin were the states with the most "notable concentration of craft activity" and their congressmen were invited to be part of this committee. OBJECTS: USA was a show for the people. Inviting congressmen furthered the idea that this was an American show that showcased the quality and skill in American crafts.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The invitation to the October 3, 1968 opening at the Smithsonian's National Collection highlighted the importance and breadth of the exhibition: "OBJECTS: USA is a survey of contemporary works in materials that have been traditionally associated with the crafts; ceramic, enamel, glass, metal, mosaic, wood, and fiber, and more recently, plastic." The invitation excitedly promoted traditional crafts, and the new twists on craft, including plastic. Senators and representatives completed interviews for television and radio about the exhibition that were then broadcast in their home states, generating greater excitement. The National Collection, S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. and Lee Nordness worked together closely to promote this show as one unlike any other ever seen in the country.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Excitement was in the air as the show prepared to open. A preview article stated, “America’s vast lot of cultural eager beavers will be let in on what ... people have known for years...that America has become one of the most important leaders in the crafts movement today,” honing in on the original goal of OBJECTS: USA. It was quickly realized that American crafts could compete on an international stage, and in some places, were at the forefront of the craft movement. Visitors to the show were confronted with crafts that had been “vastly overlooked.” Samuel Johnson, president of the company with its name behind the exhibition, knew this exhibition would “stimulate new interest” in the crafts created in America. “The repercussions should be strong,” an early press release asserted, focusing on the groundbreaking ideas presented in this unmatched exhibition. OBJECTS: USA would simultaneously bring attention to craftsmen and nudge the American public to recognize and collect studio craft. It would also push industrial arts to produce objects to compete with high-quality handmade goods. An overwhelmingly positive reaction ensured craftsmen would prosper “for the first time.” OBJECTS: USA was poised to end the “hysterical quest...for original art” in the United States with its Washington, DC opening.<sup>xxxv</sup>



## Chapter 2

### “Something Other Art Forms Have Not...”

The opening of OBJECTS: USA: The Johnson Collection of Contemporary Craft, on October 2, 1969, at the Smithsonian’s National Collection in Washington, DC, was more exciting than Nordness and Johnson’s Wax hoped. Artists with work in the exhibition came, one jeweler wearing her own work to the delight of other attendees. Reviewers from major publications attended the swanky celebration and then spread excitement for the brilliant show. *The New Yorker’s* reviewer felt “proud of [his] national heritage” after attending. Frank Getlein of the Washington, DC *Star* newspaper called the exhibition a “major work.” Women’s magazines ran interior design spreads featuring the objects. Small town newspapers ran short pieces about local artists featured in this unprecedented national show. Four hundred television stations received a “special” two-minute film to air on local news broadcasts. Excitement for OBJECTS: USA flooded the country.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Sam Johnson, president of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc., was thrilled with the success of the opening. He chose to sponsor OBJECTS: USA because it was an “appealing venture” that provided a “healthy challenge” to the “throw-away society” of the 1960s. It captured the “expression of man’s nature” and furthered the “resurgence of American crafts” in an unprecedented way, he stated in his remarks at the opening of the exhibition, echoing his sentiments from the announcement of the collection’s formation. S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian, praised the exhibition for all it would do to raise awareness of

studio craft. Ripley commended Johnson and Nordness for working “with verve and authority” to create an exhibition that “[commemorated] a new and untried movement in the art world.” The artists featured had “radically reformed” art and craft, and the Smithsonian was proud to introduce the rest of the world to this brilliant reformation.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The exhibition also struck a chord with visitors. After the opening night, Congressman Giles Kelly and his wife, Helen, wrote to the Smithsonian extolling the unique qualities of OBJECTS: USA. They called it “a great show” and expressed “hope” that “the show will travel abroad as well as in the USA.” “It tells something that other art forms have not,” they concluded. Congressman Kelly’s reaction and hopes echoed those of Lee Nordness’ in spreading the message of the unique qualities of studio craft. The show provided an insight into America in a way that the fine arts did not by revealing the combination of tradition and ingenuity associated with American society. OBJECTS: USA showed that America could compete internationally as studio craft ascended to the same level as fine art. Craft was no longer amateur folk art made by ladies at teas or men killing time; it resulted from education and an exploration of ideas that went beyond function. These pieces explored form, social ideas, and abandoned traditional use of materials. This new approach to craft gained attention and generated excitement. Across the country, articles, news programs, and snippets of information about OBJECTS: USA appeared, sharing the feelings of elation felt by its creators.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Other craft exhibitions had occurred before OBJECTS: USA, but none were so accessible to the entire country as this one. Previous exhibitions typically focused on one media type—wood, ceramic, and textile—and were often on the coasts. Few exhibitions traveled the country extensively and none combined as many craft media as OBJECTS: USA. By opening in the nation’s capital, at the nation’s museum, the show—even in its name—promoted itself as the nation’s craft exhibition. The work of artists from almost every state of the union were represented and the show promoted their work as a totally “American style.” Americans did not work in one overarching similar style; being an American craftsman meant working in a regional or personal style. Press releases touted the range of objects “from ceramics and exquisitely crafted furniture to fantastic fiber constructions and intricate jewelry creations.” Across the nation, through magazines and newspapers, people began to see studio craft as fine art with subtle stylistic differences and clever ideas interwoven into the pieces.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The history of the craft movement in America could be traced to schools and groups, like Black Mountain in North Carolina, Cranbrook in Michigan, and the Archie Bray Center in Montana. These schools, usually tucked away from mainstream American life, encouraged thought and growth in studio craft. In these incubators, fine art movements began to influence handicrafts. OBJECTS: USA brought the works of the craftsmen working at these centers into the open and made them accessible in unprecedented ways through the exhibition’s travel schedule. The housewife from Boston was probably not traveling to New York to see America House and the works of members of the American Craftsmen’s

Council, but she could travel to Boston University's art gallery to see the exhibition. A bank teller from a small town in Tennessee was unlikely to visit a craftsman's studio to see craft works, yet the bank teller could possibly travel to Chattanooga to see OBJECTS: USA. When they saw articles and photographs, these people and others were inspired to go see this exhibition. Housed in large museums and cultural centers as it traveled the country, the schedule of OBJECTS: USA meant that no one in the United States had to travel excessively far to see the exhibition. Visitors traveled from all over to the seventeen venues, and caused attendance records to be broken across the country. From museums in California, Tennessee, and South Carolina, reports of tens of thousands of visitors came back to Nordness and S.C. Johnson's Wax. And reviews of the show, which were often positive and exciting, encouraged people to see the show while they had the chance.

Meryl Secrest, art critic for *The Washington Post* wrote, "Craftsy once spoke volumes about people who hooked rugs, stitched needlework and painted plates." However, she continued, this exhibition changed that all too common opinion to one that believed craftsmen could "break new ground." After viewing OBJECTS: USA in October of 1969, Secrest understood Nordness' intent to present studio craft as a valid art movement. The exhibition blurred the line between arts and crafts, and in many of the objects the line disappeared completely.<sup>xi</sup>

The objects in the exhibition, Secrest explained, "demonstrate an imaginative vitality that one usually [associated] with the fine arts." The crafts

expanded beyond their traditional purpose of filling needs to being objects of beauty. The “imaginative vitality,” she felt, came from use of materials in new and innovative ways. Craftsmen ceased to recognize boundaries to their “inventive possibilities,” Secret wrote, and made works that did not look like traditional craft. The many works were funny, serious, intricate, or simple, or even a combination of these ideas and others. Secret saw these qualities most in the fiber and textile works that ranged from “strictly functional,” like Alma Lesch’s quilt, titled “Bathsheba’s Bedspread,” to decorative and completely nonfunctional like Azha Cohen’s “Arrow in Four Parts.” These works were juxtaposed with other pieces with the same range between functional and not, but in ceramic, wood, metal, and plastic. The pieces in *OBJECTS: USA* did not adhere to strict ideas about the intent of the object and the material. Material and function no longer dictated form for many of the craftsmen. This new use of traditional materials exemplified the new studio craft movement Nordness wanted to highlight.<sup>xii</sup>

Frank Getlein, the “prestigious art critic” for the Washington, D.C. *Star* also praised the exhibition, in a review that pleased Nordness and Johnson’s Wax very much. In Getlein’s opening paragraph, he explained that in “many places and in many different ways” crafts were “turning themselves into art.” He recognized that craft and art were one in the same in *OBJECTS: USA*. The works seemed “subordinate” to the past idea of tradition in crafts, as they no longer represented the world of pure function. In this collection, the works showed craftsmen committed to fine workmanship as “almost an end in itself” instead of secondary to function. Past ideas about craft and functionality were put

aside in OBJECTS: USA. The media—be it plastic, metal, wood, or fiber—was used to convey ideas rather than functional intention. In OBJECTS: USA the “aberrant” strains between functional craft and exploratory craft were brought together, creating a tense unity. After his brief exploration of the history and divisiveness of craft, Getlein ended his introduction with a simple imperative: “Don’t miss it.”<sup>xlii</sup>

It was not to be missed, Getlein declared, because OBJECTS: USA was a “winner.” It was even more important than ART: USA, he believed, because it is the “very first substantial recognition of a fundamentally important change in crafts,” whereas ART: USA recognized art as people already knew it. As an art critic, Getlein was familiar with concurrent art movements and exhibitions, thus was aware of the importance and necessity of the show to display craft as an art form. The work featured in the exhibition revealed that there were a “number of media available for the purposes of art.” A result of the exhibition was the realization that art was no longer bound to traditional media. After viewing OBJECTS: USA it was possible to say work completed in ceramics, wood, enamels, metals, fiber, jewelry and other media were art. OBJECTS: USA stood in the gray area that once existed between arts and crafts, crossing lines and changing perceptions about art.<sup>xliii</sup>

When exploring the gray area between arts and crafts Nordness turned to the concept of “presence,” wrote Getlein. Nordness defined “presence” as “the existence of a work in itself, not as an example of traditional—or non-traditional—craftsmanship, but as a thing-in-itself.” Getlein did not find this argument entirely

conclusive, but helpful in persuading the viewer that much of the work in OBJECTS: USA was art. Works that were made with “imagination” and had something to say about the world, those were works with presence, such as Jean Stamsta’s *Wild Sister* and *Other Brother*. OBJECTS: USA was filled with imaginative works that spoke to something deeper than function. It was an “invigorating view of new things happening in old media,” Getlein concluded. It proved that craft was art, no matter what the media, through innovation, incorporation of ideas from other movements, and the use of the object in new ways.<sup>xliv</sup>

After a record-breaking opening in Washington DC, the exhibition began its two-year tour across the United States. Its first stop was the Museum of Boston University, with additional objects on view at Harvard’s art gallery because the space at Boston University was too small to contain the entirety of the large exhibition. A presence on college campuses was important. Colleges and universities nurtured the studio craft movement, as they were places where new ideas were readily embraced. Students were typically the most aware of studio craft developments because their professors were the ones making and promoting craft. Utilizing this ready-made audience, OBJECTS: USA first chose colleges and universities to promote and encourage this development.<sup>xlv</sup>

A strong press campaign ensured that local newspapers were aware of the exhibition and its travel schedule. Johnson’s Wax and Nordness worked with Carl Byoir and Associates to send regular press releases that covered the history of the studio craft movement, the newest developments in craft, and the artists

who were the most well known in their field. This information served as the backbone for the many reviews and articles published across the country as OBJECTS: USA moved through the United States. Press releases generated excitement and spread information that would otherwise be inaccessible. As the exhibition arrived in each new space, additional releases arrived at all the region's media outlets, promoting the unprecedented show.<sup>xlvi</sup>

These early press releases led to a number of articles in national magazines. Lee Nordness once lamented that the only craft reviews were in the women's pages, but as women decorated homes, they were often a good target audience. In August of 1969 *Woman's Day* excited its readership with a preview article about OBJECTS: USA. The magazine's cover featured a spread of objects from the show, including *Bathsheba's Bedspread* by Alma Lesch and ceramics by Robert Arneson. The accompanying article featured both objects and craftsmen, with photographs of jewelry by Arline Fisch and Art Smith, and interviews with these and other artists about their inspiration and working methods. *Woman's Day* explored the importance of the craft movement through the importance of the craftsman. "The men and women involved in craft today are as diverse and interesting as the things they are creating for you to use, look at and live with," the article proclaimed. *Woman's Day* was interested in both the new craft that was sweeping the nation and the people who made it. The connection to the larger human story was as much a part of the exhibition as the pieces were. Craftsmen came from all walks of life, from the housewife looking to expand her skills to the young man majoring in a studio technique in college. The



article went on to suggest that readers could connect to this larger story in their own homes by decorating with craft. The article encouraged readers to purchase craft for their homes, and photographs gave examples of how to achieve a unified craft décor.<sup>xlvii</sup>

*Woman's Day* believed the craftsman was at the center of the story and the objects were important because they were to be used and “lived with.” *Woman's Day* wanted to “acquaint Americans with new developments in the field” and to help “stimulate interest” in studio craft. This collection, not just aimed at housewives, but all of America, would “astound” people, according to Nordness. The magazine “heartily” agreed. The exhibition was a “delightful surprise” for anyone who thought crafts were “confined to ceramic ashtrays.” The works were “not necessarily functional,” but were for “owners to contemplate” and enjoy as art in the home, the magazine explained. People should purchase pieces from the craftsmen for their own homes, rather than just seeing them in the museum setting. Through this promotion, Nordness’ idea to support the craftsman expanded as people sought out studios and the artists working in them.<sup>xlviii</sup>

The personal stories behind craft creation attracted visitors to the show. The objects were not machine made, and no two were alike. Each one reflected its maker’s hand and viewers found this intriguing and exciting. National interest in craft grew out of a “hunger” for things that were not produced by machine, according to Paul Smith. The variety of craft media provided many opportunities to experience the individuality of the artist and his or her “freedom of expression.”

As the country became interested in decorating with one-of-a-kind objects that reflected an individual's personality, OBJECTS: USA provided artworks one could use to achieve this. *Woman's Day* played to the desires of its audience and furthered excitement for the craft movement.<sup>xlix</sup>

Other magazines previewed the collection and in their reviews assisted in the generation of widespread interest as the show opened. *Contrails*, the in-flight magazine of Northwest Airlines, promoted the show's opening in the fall of 1969. The review believed OBJECTS: USA would be popular because it represented "a philosophy, a way of life...in reaction to our mechanized society." Helping in this rejection was Sam Johnson, the financier of the show, who believed in a corporate responsibility for supporting the arts. He held the "conviction" that American industry should provide "support and recognition" to artists. He and his wife wanted to "encourage" the efforts of "this new breed of artist-craftsman." OBJECTS: USA encouraged craftsmen through promotion and "a greater public awareness of this rapidly emerging art form." *Contrails* praised the collection, the artists, and the sponsors. OBJECTS: USA was a promising exhibition because it provided people with the opportunity to access craft in a new, tangible, and exciting way.<sup>l</sup>

One publication, however, did not praise the collection in the same way as other reviewers. *Craft Horizons*, the publication of the American Craftsmen's Council, published their review of the exhibition in their September/October 1969 issue. Written by Robert Simmons, he noted it was "representing the many crosscurrents of object-making in American craft and art," but was uneasy with

OBJECTS: USA's claim to represent the studio craft movement. Simmons wrote for a craft publication and was fully aware of all the ideas at play in the crafts, yet had harsh criticisms for the show. He opened his review with a simple laundry list: "The bizarre, misshapen, the caricature. The form part of function. The spectacular, the exciting, the chic. The useless. The experimental, the mistaken, the discarded. The found, the lost, the free. The pure. The multi." Simmons did not see anything coherent or worthwhile in the exhibition; his list covered all that was wrong with the exhibition in the tersest of language. To him, the objects were examples of the fringes of the studio craft movement, not the mainstream. The show, in its attempt to be comprehensive felt less than discerning. It included "mistakes" and pieces that should be "discarded." OBJECTS: USA highlighted the craftsmen who had moved away from functional works and had "taken note of the changing times" to say "something contemporary" in their works. This was unacceptable to Simmons. They were not working in rural studios; instead, they were in universities "often...at the center of a coterie of disciples." To Simmons, this environment limited their ability to understand what was happening in the rest of the country and thereby limited the quality of their work.<sup>li</sup>

This new environment was a signal of craft moving away from its roots, which *Craft Horizons* disparaged. Simmons felt that teaching students new ways of craft abandoned traditional ideas and purposes of craft, and that should not happen. Where OBJECTS: USA and other reviews celebrated this development, *Craft Horizons* considered it an abandonment of the history of craft. The show celebrated the blurred lines between art and craft worlds, and revealed that

“financial success and critical acclaim” were no longer what separated art from craft. Simmons, on the other hand, sarcastically proclaimed, “Craftsmen have made it.” Simmons saw in OBJECTS: USA proof that crafts and fine arts no longer needed to be divided, and he did not like it. The lines were crossed and Simmons felt that this lessened rather than raised craft’s importance.<sup>lii</sup>

Simmons was not satisfied with this conclusion that there was no one American style, an idea that excited Nordness and Smith. The American “philosophy of crafts” could not be readily determined from the show, and Simmons felt an overarching “quality of distortion” that was “deliberate” was the most common element. It was a “vogueish” element, which most of the craftsmen used to give their work “pizzazz” and Simmons disliked it. He recognized that the “contention” to allow craftsmen to take their place among the fine arts was not a new one, yet criticized the “ideas and social commentary” that pervaded the show, making the work more like contemporary fine art. Simmons did not like the “new ideas and directions” because they directly “[challenged] tradition.” Tradition should not be challenged, he believed, because it worked. The reasons for tradition should not be tinkered with; people were familiar with and enjoyed the craft tradition. By asking that craft be seen like art, Simmons believed craftsmen turned their backs on the tradition formed by their predecessors. Simmons’ view, however, ignored that in the United States craft tradition never had the legacy that it did in Europe. The show frustrated Simmons because he believed it pushed craft to be something it was not. Simmons’ final conclusion was that craft should follow tradition and not seek to be seen as fine art.<sup>liii</sup>

Upon reading this review, Nordness was incensed. He was “so stunned” that he took several weeks to compose a letter to Rose Slivka, the editor-in-chief of *Craft Horizons*. He did not have the “heart” to go into “all the depressing aspects” of the review, but wanted to address the issues that frustrated him most. Rose Slivka was a prominent and influential person in the craft world, and was surely aware of the importance of OBJECTS: USA in promoting craft to the general public. While she did not write the article, Nordness saw her as responsible for the misinformation in the most important craft publication in the United States. Nordness did not hold back in his critique. First in his list of complaints about the article was the “purple impressionistic writing” that was “pure college sophomore stuff.” The writing was not up to his standards and in addition to reflecting poorly on the show, it undermined the importance of the show and made the review weaker.<sup>liv</sup>

The writing was just a small issue compared to the lack of mention of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. Johnson’s Wax was the sponsor, and the collection had their name prominently attached. Simmons’ reluctance to mention Johnson’s Wax “[smacked] of the ingrate.” Johnson’s Wax “made every attempt to handle with taste” the development of OBJECTS: USA, which could only bring positive attention to the “seriousness of the contemporary objects movement,” which Simmons had quickly dismissed. Nordness emphasized the financial and vocal support provided by Johnson’s Wax and pointed out that even *Craft Horizons* benefitted from their financial support. If anything, Nordness believed, the author should express gratitude for S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. The “tactlessness” in

calling the company a “Midwestern wax factory” only exacerbated the situation in failing to mention one of craft’s greatest corporate sponsors. Nordness feared that the “Victorian” way in which this was handled would threaten corporate sponsorship to future craft exhibitions. Johnson’s Wax had done more to “encourage American art” and craft than almost any other company. They did it almost selflessly and with great “discretion.” The unfortunate publication of this review would “certainly serve as a landmark in the discouragement of corporate interest in furthering the work of brilliant American artist craftsmen.” As the voice of craft in the United States, this article pushed corporations away from the sponsorship and in turn hurt the cause of craft. Nordness wanted to encourage corporations to support craft as an art form in the United States. Simmons’ refusal to mention the corporate sponsor could only have ill effects on future craft shows Nordness argued.<sup>iv</sup>

Nordness’ final frustration with the article came because no credit was given to either the American Craft Council or the Museum of Contemporary Craft. Both organizations were of “tremendous” support in putting together the exhibition. Without the contacts and support provided by these two incredibly important groups focused on the promotion of craft in the country, OBJECTS: USA would not have come together. In the list of wrongs, Simmons suggested the exhibition came together from photographs appearing in *Craft Horizons*. This angered Nordness even more, as he and Paul Smith worked carefully to visit artists’ studios, meet with craftsmen, and develop relationships with craftsmen of the United States. Nordness acknowledged that he and Smith originally used

*Craft Horizons* for “research” but there were better ways to phrase this than “inferring that OBJECTS: USA was acquired from an armchair at the public library.” Nordness was angered by and disappointed in the review. *Craft Horizons*, while aimed at the craft community, should have recognized the importance of the exhibition and supported and praised it. Ignoring the sponsor and failing to give credit to the many groups who supported and helped bring the exhibition together only exacerbated the negativity of the review. Nordness ended his letter with deep disappointment, asking Slivka, “...What happened to your values?”<sup>vi</sup>

The only response to Nordness’ outrage *Craft Horizons* gave was to publish a second review of the show in the 1970 March/April edition by John Ashberry. He reviewed the show with a slightly more positive tone than Simmons, but he too failed to acknowledge the promotion of crafts in this exhibition. He acknowledged the work was art and had moved beyond the functional aspects of traditional craft, but he felt no one had told the craftsmen. Ashberry, like Simmons, sarcastically suggested “somebody should tell craftsmen right away that they are artists so they can stop worrying.” *Craft Horizons* did promote the show, but in an insipid, ungrateful way. Ashberry spent most of the article complaining about the Funk aspects of the show, saying it needed to be “handled with care” and was given to “overkill.” He dismissively stated that this aspect was exactly what gained the show popularity and made it provocative, suggesting the American public did not understand what constituted good craft. In two reviews, *Craft Horizons* failed to see how OBJECTS: USA was

a groundbreaking show and how it promoted studio craft to an entirely new audience. Rather than being willing to branch out and accept all aspects of craft, the magazine closed itself off to what it felt was important and tossed the rest aside as worthless “satire” with too many “farfetched trouvailles.”<sup>lvii</sup>

Though the main craft publication in the United States did not appreciate OBJECTS: USA, *The New Yorker* reviewer thought it was “wonderful.” It was “beautiful,” “interesting,” and at the same time “insane.” The collection of work was the “least boring” exhibition the author, J.M., had ever visited. For a person unaware of what was happening in the craft world, this was new, exciting and worth seeing. The humorous tone of the article reflected the humor the reviewer sensed in seeing the pieces. The show, remarkable for its size and scope, was also remarkable for “the fact that most of the three hundred and eight objects on display [were] utterly useless.” Craft might have moved away from tradition, but it was moving toward humor and excitement, which *The New Yorker* reviewer saw as a positive development. A “heavy Luddite atmosphere” no longer pervaded the craft movement and craftsmen “finally rendered unto the machine the things that [were] the machine’s.” They made things no one dared to make before, and gave traditional and familiar objects “unexpected twists and guises.” These artists were driven by the “pure pleasure of making” rather than the necessity to create and provide for themselves.<sup>lviii</sup>

This pleasure in making revealed the popular art movements that influenced craft. An “art-school aura” was felt, J.M. acknowledged, but it was a “different kind” of art school. It was “less earnest and arty” while being “more



easy and tolerant of idiosyncrasy.” The styles present in current art movements mingled in relaxed harmony with craft. There was fun in craft, with less seriousness than in other art forms, yet with high technical skill. It was this fun that bothered the reviewer from *Craft Horizons*, who felt that if the works were to be considered on the same level as fine art they needed to be just as serious. *The New Yorker* reviewer, however, would “be sorry to see the crafts movement caught up in this destructive trend” of pushing craft toward a serious tone. With its humorous and insightful works, OBJECTS: USA made *The New Yorker* reviewer excited and proud to be from the same nation as these crafts.<sup>lix</sup>

Almost a full year after opening in Washington, DC, OBJECTS: USA continued to receive praise. In “Craft Media is Art,” published in July 1970 in the *Chicago Tribune*, Thomas Willis argued for the artistic merit of studio craft. To Willis, rejection of craft by museums and galleries was “nonsense” of the “most provincial sort.” OBJECTS: USA represented the rejection of “notions of one material’s innate superiority over another.” The studio craft presented in the exhibition revealed the “artier” side of craft, and Willis believed that the more people who viewed the exhibition, the better the world would be for craftsmen. For him, “discriminating winnowers make definitive windrows in our cultural life,” meaning that OBJECTS: USA was going to winnow away lesser crafts until high-quality crafts were on equal footing with fine art. The “windrows,” in OBJECTS: USA, rather than being sheaves of grain, were ideas that were “alternately as down-to-earth as grandpa’s overalls,” like Alma Lesch’s *Like Father, Like Son* and as “conceptually vague as a Hindu mystic,” like Dale Chihuly’s *Wine Bottle*.<sup>lx</sup>

The show offered both the familiar and the unknown. Studio craft combined the comfort of childhood and home with the mysterious and unknown aspects of Eastern religion. Thus, it simultaneously made craft accessible, but also unattainable—a challenging idea to accept. But not all of the works were comfortable or mystical. Humorous pieces, too, were accessible, such as Richard Shaw's or Michael Frimkess'. Often funny without the smutty aspects, Willis described them as "clean as a laundry list." Unlike popular art, these pieces often lacked social protest, or presented it in a way that was less obtrusive. Studio craft in OBJECTS: USA was focused on the object. It was not about making a social statement or offending, but about bringing humor and quality craftsmanship to objects for daily life. These seemingly disparate ideas allowed OBJECTS: USA to keep one foot in the craft world and the other in the fine art world, the *Tribune* reviewer concluded.<sup>lxi</sup>

Again and again, reviewers commented on the scope of and quality of the work in the exhibition. Articles remarked on the need to visit it more than once to see everything it had to offer. When OBJECTS: USA opened in Iowa City, in July of 1976, the reviewer for *The Daily Iowan* said, "writing a review of OBJECTS: USA [was] like reviewing the Grand Canyon." It was overwhelming in the number of textures, colors, and ideas. It was even more difficult to review because the "diversity" of objects was "mind-boggling." The imagination, talent, and drive of the artists were "virtually indescribable." Many reviews commented on the size, but few were able to so succinctly describe it as *The Daily Iowan*.<sup>lxii</sup>

The show, because of its size and broad collection of objects, came with its own special display designed by an architect to show each piece individually on its own pedestal with special lighting. Each piece was to be viewed on its own, separate from the other works that surrounded it. Another requirement for the large exhibition was an accompanying curator. He traveled with the show, oversaw set up, and gave lectures to audiences, and interviews to local papers.<sup>lxiii</sup>

John Brown was the show's traveling curator and was as integral to the show's success as Nordness and Johnson's Wax. Brown had also been traveling curator for ART: USA, and was familiar with both the grueling schedule and the important role he played to bring people to the show as it traveled the country. Brown was interviewed about his favorite pieces, photographed with the works, and generated local excitement for OBJECTS: USA at each stop. He knew each piece and had his favorites, but was also fair in his assessment of the entire show when asked about which ones were the best, calling it an "interesting vehicle for getting into all aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> Century art history and for gaining insights into the evolution of social change in [the] century." Along with four forty-foot vans, Brown arrived at each new site to spend two weeks setting up the show before it opened to the public, prepping the space and the region for the unique collection. Though Nordness and Smith put the show together, Brown was the public face that went with it, continuing the work they started.<sup>lxiv</sup>

Brown knew the history of studio craft movement and lectured to groups at each new site, explaining why it was important and how it related to OBJECTS:

USA. He like Smith and Nordness, focused on the importance of the GI Bill in educating new craftsmen. He believed that crafts flourished in the post-war era because people were interested in returning to work with their hands and moving away from machine-made works. Craftsmen also worked in colleges in universities, which led to a “complete shift” from a “rural and isolated movement” to one that was “university oriented,” according to Brown, which helped spread the bigger ideas of the new studio craft movement. Abstract expressionism, too, influenced the crafts. However, where abstract expressionism completely changed the fine art world, Brown felt that in the crafts movement it had a “cleansing” effect where the focus returned to object and maker. Brown’s work as traveling curator gave voice to the objects in the collection. Where the objects could often speak for themselves, it was Brown who helped interpret their voices, giving insight into the vast collection as it continued its tour.<sup>lxv</sup>

In June of 1971, OBJECTS: USA arrived in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Almost two years after starting its tour in the nation’s capital, OBJECTS: USA arrived at its penultimate stop in Tennessee. An early review in *The Chattanooga Times* by Marianne Ozmer described the show as “wildly exuberant.” Ozmer enjoyed the show because it reflected the “foundation of American crafts in the utilitarian,” but built on that foundation to create something new. The show was “regarded as everything from a rebellion against conformity to a need to assert individuality and humanness” in a way that remained relevant. The objects were “designed for a chortle” or to “provoke a gasp of delight.” There were objects for use, for looking at, and for enjoying. In all of these pieces there was something

for everyone—man, woman, young, old. The director of the Chattanooga Art Association saw that where someone who “never appreciated an abstract painting because of an artificial intellectual barrier... has no problem in confronting an object.” The accessibility of craft was what made OBJECTS: USA popular with the public. Visitors were awed and amazed because they connected to the functionality of the object. One woman even remarked that her husband did not even know how to spell ‘art’ but he “really [dug] OBJECTS: USA.” Someone who disliked the current art movements found something to connect to in OBJECTS: USA. The humorous, the provocative, the comfortable, and the familiar came together in this exhibition that excited visitors around the country.<sup>lxvi</sup>

A week later, Ozmer wrote a full review of the show for *The Chattanooga Times* again and felt even more strongly than in her first article. Upon viewing it a second time, she proclaimed it to be the “incredibly beautiful” combined with the “incredibly awful.” The exhibition consisted of the “sublime alongside the sublimely ridiculous.” The show was provocative in a way that produced both grins and questions. There were tensions within the show as ceramics were juxtaposed with textiles, glass with wood, metal with enamel. It was not, according to Ozmer, an “exhibition of folk art” or a “pot and pan show.” Rather, it was a “now show” with an emphasis on the “evolution from a rural movement to the university trained one,” and for Ozmer, like for so many others, it was a decidedly positive development. It explored ideas about craft that took it to a new level. There was a strong craft tradition in Tennessee, but OBJECTS: USA revealed the new tradition developing around the country.<sup>lxvii</sup>

Like Ozmer, many other reviewers saw a “new breed of artist” at work in OBJECTS: USA. The exhibition captured, presented, and promoted this idea of the new kind of artist. The craftsmen in the show trained in schools, like many of the fine artists of the past. They no longer took apprenticeships in the traditional sense, but instead studied under teachers who made names for themselves through exhibitions and gallery shows. While not all of the craftsmen represented in OBJECTS: USA were part of the university system, many benefitted from this shift in ideas and expectations.

This new kind of craftsman was highlighted in a television special that aired on ABC in May of 1970, titled *With These Hands*. Featuring eight of the artists from OBJECTS: USA it captured “the ideals, viewpoints and creative insights of eight Americans who...abandoned the world of the assemblyline [sic] and computer.” Three ceramicists, Toshiko Takaezu, Paul Soldner, and Clayton Bailey were featured for their innovative work. Peter Voulkos, while originally a ceramicist, was shown working in his latest medium, metal. James Tanner was shown blowing glass. J.B. Blunk and Harry Nohr demonstrated their work with wood and Dorian Zachai was featured for her woven fiber pieces. These artists, while overlapping at times in media they used, each had his own approach to his work and why he were compelled to be a craftsman. *With These Hands* focused on each craftsman, exploring what one critic called the “good things about America” in craft resurgence.<sup>lxviii</sup>

*With These Hands*, also sponsored by Johnson Wax, examined the “why as well as the how” of each of the “distinctive” craftsmen through interviews and

film of how each artist created a work from start to finished. It followed Harry Nohr, a retired postmaster, into the forest to cut down trees that would then be turned to bowls. It demonstrated Clayton Bailey's love of working with clay and his feeling that he "couldn't care less if no one [bought] or [appreciated] the...comic creatures" he created. His only criteria for working were whether or not he liked his pieces. Toshiko Takaezu explained her love of craft because she got "involved" with the clay. When she worked, she felt "at peace," sensing the movement of the clay almost as though in a dance with the material. These three craftsmen, with the other five, gave voice in a national broadcast to the importance of the craft movement and why they each chose it above other endeavors.<sup>lxix</sup>

In the same way OBJECTS: USA as a whole exhibition captured the importance and growth of the American craft movement, *With These Hands* captured it in a broadcast that every American could see, not just ones able to attend the exhibition. The growth of studio craft was not "limited by chronological or economic category." Instead, "Americans of all ages, from every strata of society" sought the "answer to alienation" and "turned to a grass-root restatement of an earlier American ethic." That ethic: "Man becomes singular through the product he creates." OBJECTS: USA and *With These Hands* captured the dream of creating yet retaining the individual American spirit. It captured the ideas of the overlap between art and craft. More importantly, it focused on the craftsman as an artist, creating, making, and bringing craft from previous century to the current

one.<sup>lxx</sup> OBJECTS: USA presented new ideas about craft, which created tension between old ideas and new.

Where there was this tension between ideas—between craft and art—that was where OBJECTS: USA resided. There was more happening than just objects. There was a complete redefinition of craft in the United States. The use of the word “objects” took away any preconceived notion that the viewer might have, but it also limited in some ways the true breadth of the exhibition. It was almost as though there was no word that could contain the ideas within the show. It was no longer craft, not quite fine art, and “objects” fit the space where they resided. The work of the craftsmen extended beyond traditional ideas and moved toward an exploration of society and art. They still wanted to keep traditional materials and, often, traditional methods as a part of their work, so the traditional became the conceptual. OBJECTS: USA provided studio craftsmen, some of whom exhibited before the show, a new platform for their works. In the exhibition, they crossed lines of media, craft, art, and region to simply show their work.

OBJECTS: USA ended its successful two-year tour at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in New York. After a month there, it was packed up and shipped across the Atlantic for an eleven-city tour in Europe. There, like in the United States, it broke attendance records and over a quarter of a million people saw it. The reactions were as strong as in the United States. Articles excitedly discussed it calling it, “remarkable,” “excellent” and “the discovery of an unknown world.” Previously unaware of the deep currents running within the American studio craft movement, Europeans were happily surprised to participate in this



“unique experience which nobody ought to miss.” OBJECTS: USA, for Europeans, was a “gift from Johnson Wax” that “[illustrated] the richness and variety in form and style of the modern American artisan.” Just as it had in the United States, the European tour introduced the astoundingly broad and beautiful work of the studio craft movement to a new audience.<sup>lxxi</sup>

This new audience was astounded and overwhelmed by the 500 objects in the exhibition. Yet, out of these 500, there were ones that stood out to reviewers and visitors over and over again. These were the ones with the stories, ones that reached beyond the craftsman’s studio to the hearts and minds of viewers. Nordness and Smith chose Voulkos, Littleton, Castle, and Tawney to represent the biggest ideas taking place in studio craft in ceramics, glass, furniture and textiles, respectively, but the audience was often more interested in works by lesser-known craftsmen. When the audience could connect their own story to an object, there was a greater appreciation for craft as something worthwhile. These relationships helped people to better understand craft as art, even across a range of works. The pieces and their makers encompassed the wide range of opinions about and reactions to the exhibition, as will be discussed in the next chapter. While there was not one American style, there was one overarching reaction: this was art.<sup>lxxii</sup>

### Chapter 3

“Run, don’t walk.”

OBJECTS: USA opened eyes to the reality that craft was art. Moving beyond traditional ideas, the studio craft presented in the Johnson Collection of Contemporary Craft created nostalgia about the past while simultaneously looking at the present and the future. The works in the exhibition were from the everyday, yet with a twist that made them more intriguing than traditional craft forms. From overalls and quilts to Chinese spice jars and a baby’s cradle, OBJECTS: USA was full of the familiar. These familiar objects told stories to which people could relate. From the overalls a granddad wore to a quilt a grandmother knitted to a cradle used by generations of a family, craft was relatable. The pieces considered most relatable were the most written about in the reviews and articles about OBJECTS: USA. As it traveled the country, the same pieces stood out over and over. The pieces that were most popular were the ones that viewers could connect to a story, found funny, or simply found intriguing.

These pieces were glimpsed by the public through descriptions in early press releases that became the preview articles for the exhibition. The first press release after the opening of the show happily proclaimed, “The crafts are alive and well.” OBJECTS: USA was an “exuberant” collection that demonstrated craft vitality, and all would get a chance to see it as it traveled across the country. The “scope” of OBJECTS: USA was just a part of what made it so exciting. It was a “panoramic” collection that demonstrated the “change,” “quest” and “turbulence”

happening in the studio craft movement. The craftsmen participating in the movement were reaching for “new directions” and “new forms,” which they achieved by using “familiar materials in unfamiliar ways.” This combination of the familiar and unfamiliar made OBJECTS: USA exciting. Many reviewers echoed these sentiments after seeing the exhibition when it arrived in their hometowns. These reviews conveyed their excitement and whetted the appetites of the American public for this phenomenal exhibition. They selected pieces they felt best explored the new ideas forming in studio craft, and often, these were the same pieces, no matter the region or hosting institution.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

The popularity and mass appeal of OBJECTS: USA was society’s rejection of the machine-made, according to Paul Smith. A small wire story appeared in papers throughout the nation, highlighting the rejection of the machine-made in exchange for the handmade. As the post war generation began to own and decorate their own homes, they searched for objects that made their homes unique and represented their individual personalities. They lived in similar houses in suburbs, but it became important to feel their homes were different from their neighbors. This, Smith noted, could be achieved through decorating with craft. By purchasing handmade objects and using them in the home people ensured they had a one-of-a-kind product and were different from their neighbors.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

The article, titled “Dropouts Become Creative,” extolled the virtues of “dropping out” of the computer age to turn to craft. In a world where robotics and computers were taking over, one could still feel a human connection in craft. This

connection “revolutionized” the homemaker’s taste. Young women turned to crafts to decorate their homes to reflect their “mood and personality.” Craft allowed people to take part in the larger human story. It evoked memories, feelings, and asserted an individualistic feeling. It was familiar art that would fit into any home décor. Like the quilt a grandmother made, a sweater an aunt knitted, or a latch-hook rug made from a kit, the works in OBJECTS: USA showed Americans that they were surrounded by talented craftsmen who were changing thoughts about what it meant for craft to be art.<sup>lxxv</sup>

“Better than any critique, the 308 objects in this show argue the case for the craftsman as an artist,” said Sarah Booth Conroy in her review for *The Washington Daily News* in 1969. At a time when art could be “a stuffed goat or a laser beam,” she believed OBJECTS: USA presented craft as art. It was simple and straightforward, but also innovative and creative. Crafts combined the comfort of the homemade with the abstraction of fine art. Craft as fine art was easier to accept than more avant-garde sculptural pieces made at the same time, Conroy argued. She encouraged her readers to visit, telling them: “there’s not an object in the exhibit that isn’t worth a stare, a laugh, or an exclamation.” The exhibit reflected the “pockets of intense activity” going on throughout the country with each piece telling the different stories of those regions. There was much to be seen in the exhibit and Conroy believed visiting several times was the best way to take in the entire exhibition. This was a valid belief, as those who went multiple times often said, “I didn’t see this one last time.” It was a large, impressive show that Conroy felt offered something for everyone from Richard

Shaw's *Couch and Chair with Landscape and Cows* to *Cradle Cabinet* by Sam Maloof. One of the first reviews, when the show opened at the Smithsonian in October of 1969, Conroy's review was the start of a pattern of excitement that saw the objects as fine art and encouraged the public to attend.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

In February of 1970, four months after the Smithsonian opening, *Harper's Bazaar* ran a review of OBJECTS: USA in their regular column "Needles and Pins." Natalie Gittelson, the author, happily confessed in the first paragraph that she was the sort of "lowly... happy ignoramus" who knew nothing about art. Gittelson wrote with a self-deprecating style, giving her review an excited man-on-the-street tone. She claimed ignorance about art or crafts, but her lack of knowledge did not keep her from "falling in love" with what she saw. This was not ordinary "stuff;" it was "rich, prodigious, sometimes beautiful, sometimes funny, sometimes outrageous, always alive" stuff. Stuff that was so compelling that Gittelson, like others, told "erstwhile non-museum goers...run, don't walk," to this exciting and compelling exhibition. She believed OBJECTS: USA would cause a "mass conversion" to craft as art, and others would enjoy it as much as she did. This "mass conversion" was what Nordness hoped for and reviewers like Conroy and Gittelson led the way for others to come to the same understanding.<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Gittelson judged the works on a "single, simple criterion of excellence." That simple criterion: whether or not she wanted to take the work home with her. She did not care about the value of the piece, or the fame of the artist, she cared about how it would make her feel when it was near her. On this simple principle, Gittelson declared OBJECTS: USA a "big winner." The pieces were warm,

inviting, and funny, and most importantly, she wanted to take many of them home with her. There were pieces that reminded her of her family and of the American landscape, like Alma Lesch's *Bathsheba's Bedspread*. There were some that she considered taking home because they would make visitors smile rather than gasp upon entering her living room, and others still that provoked ideas and memories, like Shaw's couch and chair. When reviewers reacted with the sort of excitement Gittelson did, it encouraged people to visit and see for themselves. Once in the exhibition, the objects kept visitors entertained for hours.<sup>lxxviii</sup>

Reviewers often described the objects that kept visitor's attention in simple, powerful words. The works in OBJECTS: USA were intriguing. They were funny. They were misshapen. They were familiar. They were odd. People enjoyed the humor of Richard Shaw's non-functional ceramic couch and chairs; they found wit combined with function in Sam Maloof's *Cradle Cabinet*. History combined with modern cartoon strips in Michael Frimkess' vase, *Things Ain't What They Used to Be*. Visitors liked the bright colors, if not lack of functionality, in Marilyn Pappas's *Opera Coat*. As the show traveled throughout the country, the same objects stood out to reviewers and viewers and touched them in some way. These pieces told a part of the story of OBJECTS: USA and were what made it unlike other craft shows of the same era.

As mentioned, Richard Shaw's *Couch and Chair With Landscape and Cows* was a very popular piece with reviewers. Shaw, a Funk potter from California, "refined" the usually misshapen and odd Funk approach to ceramics in such a way that his works were infused with both nostalgia and romance. The

“whimsical” small earthenware couch measured 9½ x 18½ x 8½ inches and was painted with acrylics. It had brown legs that recalled the legs of a Danish Modern sofa and the cushions, arms, and back seemed to be just a little overstuffed, but were “as real as you can imagine, in all their old boarding house stain and wear.” A cow lay down in a grassy field on the back of the couch. The chair measured 9 x 10 x 8½ inches and continued the landscape of the couch with two cows standing and eating grass in a rocky meadow. It was the obvious and perfect companion to the couch, as they were both nostalgic and humorous parts of an inaccessible world. The furniture was too large for a dollhouse, and yet too small for a person. “Painted with placid cows in a pastoral setting” it was a “deadpan and very funny piece,” declared N.F. Karlins in New York’s *Exposure*. The “unexpected” nature of the piece provoked “pleasure” in the viewer for the “afunctional ceramic work.” With “impeccable” craftsmanship his pieces excited and interested audiences. Reviewers were drawn to the “tacky ceramic mini couch and chair” because they spoke of “America’s heartland.” It spoke in “heartbreaking, funny, inventive, original cliché.” Shaw reached into the past and touched the present.<sup>lxxix</sup>

Another piece with great resonance was Kim Newcomb’s “delectably useless” *Hot Dogs and Potato Chips*. The hot dogs, buns, potato chips, and cups were of blown iridescent glass, sitting on paper plates and a plastic tray. Viewers instantly recognized it as a meal that represented summer picnics, Fourth of July celebrations, and other American traditions. They were a purely visual statement, but their familiarity made them fun for viewers to look at. Part of the Funk

aesthetic like Shaw, Newcomb was also from California, and his work was considered a “standout” among the other Funk pieces, for its realism. By the time OBJECTS: USA began its tour, Newcomb had received recognition for the “inventiveness of his ideas” and masterful use of the media. His pieces were not just for fun. They were loaded with social commentary to provoke the viewer to consider modern American life and traditions. Newcomb’s work was a “delicious, inventive brightness of color” with a “[novelty] of design” that kept the viewer entertained with multiple colors and reflections off the glass. One reviewer considered it an example of what “craft can do if the right artist sets his mind” to explore an idea and go against the “ingrown character of the medium.” Moving away from the traditional function of glass, Newcomb embraced the new ideas of humor, wit, and fun to be had in the new craft era.<sup>lxxx</sup>

Michael Frimkess’ *Things Ain’t What They Used to Be* was wildly popular among visitors for its witty interpretation of a traditional form. A huge wheel-thrown vessel covered in hand-drawn cartoons, its shape revealed his interest in historical Greek and Oriental vessels. Frimkess merged the world of craft, fine art, cartoon, and social commentary in his work because he believed it was time for “all people, and especially the artists...to pull together to find a solution to an unprecedented world crisis.” The cartoons and ideas in his work reflected the new ideas that were “percolating” within the ceramics field and helped bridge the gap that was often between the ceramic world and the general public. While *Things Ain’t What They Used To Be* did not appear to contain social commentary at first glance, a close examination of the detailed cartoons revealed Frimkess’



thoughts on what was wrong with the world, and how artists could help fix them.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

The cartoons on *Things Ain't What They Used to Be* featured a ceramics class with students working on wheels, pots drying, and kilns being fired. The images progressed around the pot, inviting viewers closer to study the details. The bottom border featuring a repeating blue and white stylized border like those found on Chinese ceramic vessels came into focus as one moved closer, a surprising juxtaposition to the bright images on the rest of the vessel. The cartoon images, based on the Columbia University ceramics class where Frimkess was a graduate student, showed students talking to one another, saying things like "I might not be poor but I'm a better artist 'n he'll ever be," and "Marge, this is so interesting." One student commented that she was "just going to re-weld [a] sculpture and take it to America House," a sly dig at the students who re-worked pieces to sell at the Craft Council's gallery. Frimkess also touched on social issues of the day, with a cartoon at the top depicting the African-American Civil Rights struggle and America's history of slavery. The vessel was a technical feat, but the decoration was somewhat sloppy. This contrast "between the beauty of the piece at a distance and its hideousness close up" was what made it intriguing and gave it a "wonderful, lunatic air," according to Gittelson. Frimkess' vessel was an example of how tradition could be turned on its ear to create something new. By being inventive with decoration on something associated with the past, he captured the ideas that were moving quickly through

the new craft movement. Tradition had a place, but there was now room for new ideas that played on the past.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

Like ceramics, furniture also captured the imagination and hearts of those who saw it. Where the humor of Funk ceramics was what many found attractive in that category, the familiarity in furniture, such as Sam Maloof's *Cradle Cabinet*, attracted many reviewers. A 68½-inch tall combination of cabinet and inset cradle, it combined the functionality and familiarity of what would normally be two pieces of furniture in an inventive way. The top of the piece consisted of two cabinets that opened out; the bottom of six drawers, three on each side, but it was the swinging cradle in between that drew attention. This combination of forms represented a melding of the humorous with the functional in a well-designed way. "Craftsmanship and joinery" were important to Maloof, but design was just as, if not more important, to him. The emphasis on good design made his work attractive to viewers, whether they were aware of it or not.<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

Frank Getlein, art critic for the Washington, DC, *Star*, called Maloof's *Cradle Cabinet* a "fresh and refreshing" take on nursery furniture. It was functional, beautiful, and of high technical skill, pushing craft toward the category of art. Surely, it would "lull any baby to sleep," Getlein thought. The perfect combination of aesthetics and functionality, it was "utterly satisfactory" to an artist's eye and "functional to a mother's." N.F. Karlins, praised the piece, calling it a "stunning work" that "beautifully incorporated" the "sensual" appeal of wood into a "severely modern piece." It was "restrained" and "reminiscent of Shaker furniture" that combined the traditions of the past with the sleek lines of

Modernism. It combined a variety of ideas, and like Frimkess' vase, it was a work with historical roots that entertained and intrigued.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Wendell Castle, also a furniture maker, was often written about for his sculptural wood pieces that were visually stunning and intriguing. Nordness chose Castle as one of the artist-craftsmen who led the “renaissance” taking place in wood as a “creative medium.” Castle created highly sculptural works through a process of wood lamination. He stacked pieces of wood together, laminated them, and then carved away to create his furniture, rather than using more traditional methods of furniture making that involved adding rather than taking away. Castle believed “furniture should not be derived from furniture” as it only led to variations within traditional ideas. He wanted to create new forms unlike anything seen in the past, which led him to “sculptural [forms] derived from a functional ancestor.” He felt organic forms offered the “most exciting possibilities” because they could “never be completely understood in one glance.” Viewers needed to approach, walk around, and study his work to fully understand both form and function. Castle’s work required the viewer to involve himself with the piece to best understand it. His *Desk* appeared to defy gravity and kept its purpose secret until the user approached it from its most functional angle—the back.<sup>lxxxv</sup>

Castle’s *Desk*, made of mahogany with a silver leaf top, appeared to barely balance on three legs. It swooped and curved in space, and while approachable, if one were sitting behind it to work, he would be unapproachable from two sides. It was a “superb” desk, “all curving surfaces and undulating legs,”

that invited the viewer in, but also held him at a distance. Like a snake, the side leg arched up and then back down to create two of the balance points—one so slender it seemed almost impossible for balance. Like its counterpoint, the opposite leg was light and airy, contrasting to the strong center arch anchoring the desk. Castle took the elements of practicality and functionality from industrial design and combined them with the freedom of sculpture to create his works. Doing this, he felt, created only self-imposed limits on his work. His desk, with its thin legs and airy quality, looked as though it was “poised to take a leap into space” according to the *Arkansas Gazette* reviewer. The desk and Castle’s other wooden piece, *Table-Chair-Stool*—a piece that stretched across space to fulfill three functions—were described as “quasi-fantasy” works that were “poured, not crafted.” He transformed furniture into sculpture. He was considered one of the first to transform the furniture craft world, and reactions to his pieces in OBJECTS: USA showed that visitors liked this transformation to sculptural pieces.<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

Harvey Littleton, ceramicist turned glass blower also experimented with the contrast of form and function. Often credited with reviving glass blowing in the United States, his glass works created “new facets of light” and through “new extensions of form.” *Falling Blue* was a work created in glass with five tubes of glass that seemed to be in the midst of falling as though gently pushed. It was inspired by the “winds of change” that came through the craft world and “swept away the clichés” of traditional objects, and brought a “sense of adventure” that freed craft to be innovative and exciting. His work oscillated between functional

and simply artistic, while appearing to be in motion, though stable. It was an exercise in the contrast of ideas about the stability of glass and its fragility.

*Falling Blue* represented the “unfettered creativity” of craftsmen who sought to interpret old media in new ways. It was “unorthodox,” “surreal,” and “uninhibited.” Like other works in OBJECTS: USA, Littleton’s work reflected high technical standards, and—as one press release asserted—one was “struck by how often only a label [separated] the craft from the art object.” *Falling Blue* defied gravity, as the different pieces of glass seemed to fall toward earth, but never reached the ground. They were an exploration in gradations of color, each tube a slight variation the color blue creating a stable “reflecting glass mobile,” according to Thomas Willis. Praised for his “innovation” in blown glass, Littleton’s piece represented the revolution in craft revival that pushed away from familiarity to intellectual engagement.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

Familiarity, and intellectual engagement, abounded in the textile grouping, and several of the fiber pieces caught the attention of many reviewers. Alma Lesch, a quilter from Kentucky, was one of the textile craftsmen whose *Bathsheba’s Bedspread* was often written about in reviews. A large quilt with many bright colors and stitched patterns created with appliqué, it resembled farmland from an airplane. One reviewer called it a “gorgeous variation on a quilt.” The piece combined a number of fabrics, and patterns abounded in its shapes and colors. John Brown, the show’s traveling curator, named this as one of his favorite pieces because it was not “Xeroxed into creation.” There was “human warmth on the creative level” in *Bathsheba’s Bedspread*. It gave the

“double pleasure of being recognizable in ancestry but more provocative than the every-day useful,” according to Don Morrison, reviewer for the *Minneapolis Star*. It was a “completely individual self-statement” that was “to be touched or gazed upon with the pleasure and awe that only the best art can convey.” A bedspread was a familiar object, but it was turned into a less mundane work in Lesch’s hands. The everyday became art in OBJECTS: USA.<sup>lxxxviii</sup>

Lesch’s *Like Father, Like Son* also struck a chord with visitors and reviewers. A quilted piece, it combined overalls, a shirt, a denim jacket, glasses, and a third-grade McGuffey Reader into a wall-hanging quilt that looked like a portrait. It reflected ideas about the rural life and evoked memories of childhood for many who viewed it. Alexander Fried, reviewer for the San Francisco *Examiner* called it a “truly sensitive” piece, not to be missed. To Lesch, it represented Kentucky and the experiences she had spending her entire life there. To others, it represented generations of their families. She enjoyed combining the traditional with the non-traditional and pushed craft toward new ideas and new forms. Lesch was credited with being one of the first artists to “create pictorial hangings utilizing stitching with found objects,” and did it in a way that was comfortable and familiar for viewers. *The New Yorker’s* reviewer called it an “affectionate portrait” with “a lovely, nostalgic blueness” that reminded the reviewer of Wyeth’s paintings. Nostalgia was a comfortable, happy feeling for many, and this awakening and connection to something bigger made OBJECTS: USA an appealing exhibition.<sup>lxxxix</sup>

*Opera Coat* by Marilyn Pappas was another textile work that captured the attention and praise of reviewers. A long black silk coat, it opened to a colorful, ruffled, fabric collage that appeared to burst from the interior of the coat. The coat was a beautiful collection of colors, fabrics, stitching, and other found objects. Not directly influenced by one individual or movement, Pappas took ideas from “San Blas Indian molas, Rauschenberg assemblages, Schwitters collages, and Matisse’s use of space.” Her approach was based on the “visual aspects” of the original intent of the piece, that she then changed with “pieces of clothing, fibers, and fabrics” that suggested “possibilities” of what the object could be. Her work developed “more or less spontaneously” and she often changed her original idea several times before achieving the final result. For her, the opera coat was an “elegant and appealing object.” She wanted to involve herself more deeply with the idea of the coat as an object of beauty, but did not want to “change its basic character.” In her approach, she maintained the integrity and idea of the coat, yet made it an art object. It was an “exotic bas relief” that transformed an ordinary coat into a work of art.<sup>xc</sup>

This transformation of the ordinary object took place because Pappas allowed spontaneity in her work process. Spontaneity and allowing the work to dictate the form prevailed in the works of OBJECTS: USA. This gave the work freedom, and in that freedom, artists were able to break away from traditional ideas. Pappas used these transformative ideas to create a coat that looked as though it was “about to receive a wearer.” It was made of “blindingly vivid material” that created a “very effective sense of ... something revealed.” The

“something revealed” was not tradition, but a deeper idea about the purpose of materials and craft itself, and something personal about the artist. Tradition was important for many of the artists, as that was the way they learned, but they felt it was time to break away from that tradition. It was time to seek a new style of art and to work in a new way. OBJECTS: USA gathered the work of artists interested in this idea together to show the rest of the country the vitality and importance of craft.<sup>xci</sup>

Jean Stamsta’s woven fabric “dolls” called *Wild Sister* and *The Other Brother* were incredibly popular pieces with crowds and reviewers that broke with tradition to speak to new styles. The two “figures” stood “limply in their bright fabrics like figures at some supra-terrestrial cocktail party,” according to Frank Getlein. Derived from rag dolls, he considered this new interpretation to be quite the “metamorphosis.” Natalie Gittelson, of *Harper’s Bazaar*, “wanted to take [them] home” with her because they reminded her of her family. These woven and knitted pieces were like rag dolls, but updated from traditional methods with new weaving and stitching. Gittelson described them as having “more legs than normal” and were “dizzily striped; [with] furry bellies; and no heads to speak of.” They were misshapen, but she was drawn to them “intuitively” because they reminded her of “The Sillies, a stage everyone goes through while growing up.”<sup>xcii</sup>

*Wild Sister* and *Other Brother* were interesting and attractive because they awoke memories of childhood and family. Stamsta’s work was abstract, yet appealed to people because it reminded them of their youth. Her work had a humorous tone, but was executed in an unusual way. It was funny and charming,



yet slightly off-putting. A reviewer from Michigan, in an article titled, "OBJECTS: USA Fills All Needs," said Stamsta's work had a sense of "humor with veiled emotion."<sup>xciii</sup>

This gray area of emotions made these pieces attractive because it touched on a number of feelings and memories. While it was difficult to determine the purpose or intent of the works, people still found them attractive and intriguing. Like so many of the other works in OBJECTS: USA, it was an ability to draw a relationship connection to these pieces. The names even, *Wild Sister* and *The Other Brother*, made people think about their own siblings and those relationships, creating a connection to otherwise unusual pieces.

Familiarity and relationships were continual themes that provoked reaction and excitement for OBJECTS: USA. Robert Arneson's *Sink* spoke to a familiar object used and argued over by every family during morning routines. A 26½ x 18 inch white earthenware sink with platinum luster, it looked just like an ordinary bathroom sink, except Arneson's had a stain at the drain inscribed with the words "HARD TO GET OUT STAIN." Arneson "transformed the familiar objects of modern life into vehicles of brash and virulent social commentary." *Sink* was a "bathroom washbasin lovingly recreated with all its parts (plumbing, soapcake, stains) sort of drunkenly inexact" that poked at deeply held beliefs and traditions in American life. Arneson's "hard to get out stain" represented the stains on American society, including social and political struggles.<sup>xciv</sup>

J.M. of *The New Yorker* called it a "small, mean-looking sink" like the sort "you see in gas-station bathrooms," finding it off-putting and uncomfortable.

Other reviewers found it to be a humorous and “witty” take on the “stuff and clutter and sentimental kitsch of our domestic lives,” missing the aspect of social commentary that was important to Arneson. His works had a “great deal of effect in terms of changing the term ‘craft’ to ‘object’ and allowed it credence as an entity.” The sink, with its combination of familiarity, humor, and repulsiveness, broke down barriers about what ‘craft’ should mean and be. Like so many other forms in the exhibition, it took a familiar functional form—a sink—and turned it into a humorous object.<sup>xcv</sup>

Some objects were without humor, but exemplified the high quality of craftsmanship of the artists with a bit of cheekiness. The jeweler Arline Fisch’s work was of high technical quality and made of fine materials, like silver, but with a challenge to the wearer to balance it on her body. Fisch’s *Body Ornament* was a 52½ inches long silver ornament that was secured to a black vestment to be worn that allowed the piece to hang over the body, covering both the front and back, and swing freely. A series of small loops held the intricate piece together, connecting each part to the other and allowing the piece to move at the wearer did. The metal pieces were lightly textured and repeated a series of ovals and coral-like forms, narrowing as it flowed down the front of the body. Fisch liked “organic forms” with “dramatic, large-scale effects,” and *Body Ornament* was an excellent combination of both ideas. To further “exploit” the movement of the piece on the wearer, Fisch interlocked or linked pieces to explore “fully the elements of movement and reflected light when worn.” The strong organic qualities of *Body Ornament* gave the loops and thin strips of metal a skeletal feel. It ended in shell-

shaped pieces, giving visual weight to the otherwise airy piece. The back was a simple line down the spine, consisting of the same thin, finger-like pieces, ending in a single round shell shape just above the ankles. It was, according to Thomas Willis of the *Chicago Tribune*, a “fascinating [trope]...on the twin ideas of decoration and ornament...executed with a masterly skill.”<sup>xcvi</sup>

Malie Bruton, staff writer for *The Columbia Record* in Columbia, South Carolina, called the jewelry “both art and adornment.” Citing the dictionary definition that jewelry should be secondary to clothing, Bruton thought Fisch’s work refuted this, as it was not “secondary to anything.” It was a work that deserved a primary place on the body. Fisch’s jewelry design was brilliant because it was “part of a concept as new as the most modern [ideas]...and as old as...ancient civilizations,” which was the concept of decorating the body, but Fisch interpreted this in a new and intriguing way. A “total body adornment,” it was designed to “catch and hold attention” and appeal to all. Fisch’s *Body Ornament* was designed with nature in mind and a sense of the organic. It stood out among the other works for its new interpretation of how jewelry should be worn and viewed. The best part, according to Bruton, was the challenge to think how “clothes will best accessorize your jewelry?” This challenge was what Fisch sought in making craft jewelry equal to a painting, which would be a focal point of a room. The ornament became the focal point of the body.<sup>xcvii</sup>

Other reviewers too, enjoyed the idea of full-body ornamentation in Fisch’s work. The “forged and fused” work revealed the “individually of the craftsman” while “speaking to the heart of the observer,” thought Nora Taylor of the *Christian*

*Science Monitor. Body Ornament*, while one of three pieces Fisch exhibited in OBJECTS: USA, captured imaginations and eyes with its flexibility and organic quality. Echoing the organic work of Wendell Castle, it also had a sense of playfulness like Shaw's. Jewelry, though meant to be worn, also captured the broader ideas of studio craft that were so important to OBJECTS: USA.<sup>xcviii</sup>

Though there was no overarching American style, there was the continued idea of connection to the past, to the present, to the future in OBJECTS: USA. By connecting works to past craft traditions through use of traditional media in new ways, viewers felt connected to the objects. People saw their stories reflected in the materials as well as the social, political, and artistic ideas represented in OBJECTS: USA. In a world where computers and machines seemed to be taking over everything, craft provided a way to connect to the earth apart from machines. These pieces represented a different future where divisions between art and craft were no longer important. After OBJECTS: USA finished its tour of the country many argued that there was no longer a need for those arbitrary divisions. A ceramic vessel could be displayed in a museum next to an abstract expressionist painting. Textiles could hang next to modern sculptures. OBJECTS: USA looked to a future where craft was as important as fine art. Individuals could express themselves easily through their craft-decorated homes, and the machine would not win out. Craft looked toward a bright and exciting future.

This future included those who were school-aged at the time of OBJECTS: USA's tour. Richard Daehnert and Helen Patton wrote *Creating With The Hands:*

*A Guide to the Crafts for Young People with projects based on OBJECTS: USA The Johnson Wax Collection of Contemporary Crafts.* Despite its exhaustive name, the guide was a simple pamphlet, designed to teach about craftsmanship, design elements, materials, and the processes of creating craft. Using the objects featured in the exhibition, *Creating With the Hands* highlighted how craftsmen combined “understanding of design, materials, and processes to produce objects for our enjoyment.”<sup>xcix</sup>

Exploring the history of craft, Daehnert and Patton discussed the “artistic excellence” that craftsmen used to produce their high quality objects. They explained the importance of each design element, highlighting Marilyn Pappas’ *Opera Coat* as an excellent use of color, which developed “fully...the natural...richness of the material.” The pamphlet also highlighted pottery, jewelry, and woodworking to demonstrate how craftsmen combined the “beauty of form with the usefulness of function.” *OBJECTS: USA* provided inspiration for artistic exploration and allowed teachers to show students that art could be found in the most simple of artistic designs.<sup>c</sup>

Students were encouraged to look at Alma Lesch’s *Like Father, Like Son* to find their own materials to create a collage that represented home and familiar objects. The same objects that caught reviewers’ eyes and excited visitors in turn inspired young people to explore craft as an art form. The exploration of new craft ways in *OBJECTS: USA* introduced a new generation to the quality and importance of craft in America’s history through the creation of their own crafts.<sup>ci</sup>

As there were over 300 pieces in the exhibition there were a number of pieces that were overlooked, not mentioned, or simply not written about because there was not space in reviews. Some of the pieces spoke to political movements, social changes, or other controversial ideas were not mentioned because of their uncomfortable nature. The pieces that were not mentioned tell just as much of the story of OBJECTS: USA as the pieces that received greater attention from the press. A selection of these pieces, such as the enamels, plastics, and other works that were as important to the exhibition as the popular ones will be discussed further in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

### “An American Art Form”

OBJECTS: USA contained such an overwhelming number of works that it was difficult for reviewers to discuss all of them. Pieces that were eye-catching and funny, or created by the best-known artists were often the ones that made it into reviews and photo spreads. This focus on a handful of objects left several hundred artists and objects to be discovered without the assistance of the press. There were three craft-media left out of reviews completely, plastics, enamels, and mosaics, mainly because they were comprised of a small number of objects. There were also ceramic, fiber, and wood pieces that failed to receive press coverage. This was unfortunate because these pieces were just as exciting and interesting as the ones discussed in reviews. These other works, especially those in plastic, reflected the new, innovative direction of studio craft.

Plastics, a small group, featured only eleven objects. One of these objects was the simply titled, *Table*, by Wendell Castle. The table had the same organic, art nouveau flowing lines as did his *Desk* and *Table-Chair-Stool*, and ended in a flat top that cantilevered away from the base. Castle began working with laminated plastic to see if he could achieve a similar look as his laminated wood pieces. According to *OBJECTS: USA*, he “infused this cold material with unusual warmth” and created objects with a sense of life. The table’s sense of life came from its base that seemed to be a cross between the tail of a seal and the trunk of a large tree. Plastic was a relatively new material for crafts, and for many was not a craft material at all. Plastic had not yet reached a zenith of ubiquity in the

household, and many felt it was never to be used in craft. It was a product that was disposable, which was anathema to the purpose of craft. It represented the mass market and not the culture of the individual that so many wanted to reflect by purchasing craft. Castle's *Table*, however, was craft because this was the artist-craftsman claiming new materials for new interpretations of old ideas.<sup>cii</sup>

Carolyn Kriegman also worked in plastics, claiming new materials for traditional ideas. Her *Necklace*, made of plexiglass, was similar in concept to the metal body ornament of Arline Fisch. Unlike Fisch's work, Kriegman's covered the chest, not the entire body, was stiff rather than flexible, and was made of transparent, light plastic. Like many of the artists seeking individual expression, Kriegman believed the individual should choose her own personal expression through jewelry. There were "many who [chose] jewelry as they would sculpture" and would wear it as an "eclectic identification badge," Kriegman believed. She designed with this group in mind. These were people who would put as much consideration into their body ornament as they would the furniture in their home. Kriegman, one of the younger artists, wanted to use plastic to create sculptural assemblages that would "exploit the qualities of light, color and transparency" that were what made plastic a fascinating new craft material. She had a "persistent concern" for "meticulously constructed form" which she traced to her studies with Josef Albers and Olaf Skoogfors. European teachers, like Albers and Skoogfors, brought tradition and a focus on the importance of structure to the United States where it was then changed and interwoven with other ideas to create a new kind of craft. Plastic, never before used as a craft material, was part



of that new tradition. Kriegman, like other artists of her generation, wanted to use her art to reveal her sense and understanding of the “visual intellect.” Her work was a comment on her experiences and the “realization of the better world seen by her inner eye.” She, like others, desired to improve the world through her artwork. She incorporated her intellectual life into her work, infusing craft with more mental vitality than the pursuit of sheer function ever had.<sup>ciii</sup>

Other artists, too, incorporated this intellectual aspect into their work with new methods, like ceramicist Howard Kottler. His ceramic work challenged ideas about craft, as he used mass-produced porcelain blanks to create plates with decalomania decoration, using industrial production materials to make craft, further challenging the idea and intention of craft. Kottler also touched on uncomfortable political subjects, as he did with a plate that featured a series of windows with Abraham Lincoln behind them, his eyes covered by other images. Playful, yet startling, Kottler’s pieces made the viewer uneasy. In a show filled with fun and playful works that brought on bouts of nostalgia, the idea of an assassinated president did not fit. The plate, *(Sticks) (Stones) > (Bones)* was a porcelain blank plate with ceramic decal decoration. The decals were of five heads of President Lincoln that marched across the plate, each with a window over the eyes and forehead, with each window featuring a different image relating to President Lincoln in some way. Covering the eyes made the heads look even more disembodied and took away the human element of the former president. The first head and window (from left to right) had a split image of the dome of the Capitol, the second, two separate images of two men fighting. The

third window had a small pistol that stretched across the two panes, looming over Lincoln's head. The fourth window showed a repeated image of two children in a boat, somewhat cartoon-like, with one leaning over to point at something in the water. The final image in the film-strip-like collection was the Lincoln Memorial, bookending the progression in a somber and stately way. Each window had a shade at the top, as though one could pull it down and cover the disturbing images. Kottler was interested in both humor and social change, but the confrontational images in his work made viewers uneasy with their political and uncomfortable historical references. According to *OBJECTS: USA*, his work "[assumed] very special qualities" when looked at within the context of Kottler's own definitions, and against the other ceramics of the day. Kottler defined his work by his own "palace-pottery" standards, which examined the role of ceramics in a tongue-in-cheek way. By the time of the exhibition in 1969, Kottler had been "represented in more than one hundred and fifteen exhibitions," and won more than thirty-five awards. Kottler was a prolific ceramicist, but the confrontational nature of his works led reviewers to turn to other pieces that were more nostalgic and comforting.<sup>civ</sup>

Dale Chihuly, while not as well known at the time as Harvey Littleton, was also partially responsible for reviving studio glass in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States. Chihuly's technical skill in the *Wine Bottle* he exhibited in *OBJECTS: USA* surpassed that of Littleton's. The bottle was organic, flowing, and fused clear and yellow glass together in such a way that it looked like glowing neon. It was much more an objet d'art than a functional wine bottle, and

one was not sure how to approach it to use it. Despite the confusion as to use, it was a mastery of glass-blowing and showcased Chihuly's ability to manipulate glass to make it delicate, beautiful, flowing, light, warm, and inviting. Chihuly's work was sensual and evocative, begging to be both touched and admired. It was a mastery of juxtaposition between a user's desire to touch it and his confusion about its use. According to its name, *Wine Bottle* should be functional, but the way in which it could function was unclear. This confusion made it a wonderful object, but also made it difficult for reviewers to understand it and caused them to turn to objects that were more straightforward. While beautiful and of high technical skill, the *Wine Bottle* appealed on an aesthetic level, but like many of the crafts in OBJECTS: USA, it challenged ideas about function and changed the idea and intention of craft.<sup>cv</sup>

A metal artist, Brent Kington, created whimsical sculptures that captured a sense of imagination and memories of childhood with a high level of craftsmanship and attention to details. *Air Machine*, a four-foot piece, was occasionally photographed for articles but rarely discussed. Kington also had a second piece in the exhibition, *A-Way-We-Go*, which was also a machine-like work executed in metal. *Air Machine* was made of forged mild iron and cast bronze and evoked Victorian metal structures while appearing futuristic at the same time. The main body of the machine was made of sheet metal folded to look like a paper airplane and seated on a chassis of wheels with intricate metal designs. A small Hobbit-like man sat at the back of the machine holding a handle attached to a brake at the front of the machine. It was a fantastical and funny

piece. Kington admitted that “fantasy and whimsy” played a “dominant role” in his work, and he had a “long fascination with miniature sculpture” and toys from the eighteenth century. These influences were visibly present in *Air Machine* with its toy-like qualities and intricate metal additions. After seeing his son play with toy cars, Kington wanted to explore the idea of “push-toy sculpture,” an idea he fully developed in these two works. *A-Way-We-Go* was a cast sterling car, based on early vehicle models. A whimsical monkey-like creature with a hat of fruit and flowers, a la Carmen Miranda, drove the car while another creature hung off the back, holding on to its own wheel and a garland with a bell attached that flew out behind the car. A fun and playful piece, it was so attractive to visitors that it was stolen during the tour of OBJECTS: USA.<sup>cvi</sup>

Much of the metal in OBJECTS: USA was jewelry. Some jewelry, like that of Arline Fisch was popular and written about in reviews and photographed for spreads. Other works of jewelry were discussed in the women’s pages of magazines and newspapers, as women were more likely to wear and use jewelry, but this jewelry was very different than traditional gemstones and gold bands. It was more body ornament than jewelry. Art Smith’s *Neckpiece* orbited around the neck in several offset bands, ending in balls, recalling the orbit of planets around the sun. Smith thought jewelry was “incomplete” until it was worn; a piece alone was not a full work of art. It needed to “relate to the body” and come to a “full realization” when worn. The object was to be viewed as part of the body, with the body acting as the final element for the otherwise incomplete work.

Smith's work was to be understood as an extension of the wearer rather than as a stand-alone piece.<sup>cvi</sup>

Another craftsman whose jewelry was more like body art was Lynda Watson. Her *Landscape Neckpiece* was an intricate exploration of shapes, lines, and ideas that represented an abstracted landscape. Like other jewelers, Watson saw the body as an "environment to be decorated," much like the interior of a home. As people looked to make a statement about individuality in an increasingly similar world, one-of-a-kind jewelry helped make that statement. For Watson, the body became a "showcase" where "reactions from others" were "immediately concise and personally satisfying." The wearer had a sense of pride when recognized by others for a sense of style and fashion. Watson liked metal because it was easy to work with and could "represent any idea." She used its malleability to create "adornment for the body" from either "pictorial or intangible" ideas. Like other artists in *OBJECTS: USA*, Watson wanted to capture her ideas in her work, while making it functional and beautiful. Creating a unique piece that was eye-catching with a depth of ideas interwoven into it was her goal. She used her skills as a jeweler to capture her ideas, elevating her work to the status of art.<sup>cvi</sup>

Two of the smaller groups also contained objects by artists who sought to capture larger ideas about themselves and the world in their work. Enamels were one of these two groups, and featured only eight artists. These artists created beautiful objects, but they were rarely recognized because of their unusual nature. The process of enamels was somewhat complicated and many of the

works looked very similar to the ceramic works, leaving them unnoticed by reviewers. However, one of the artists used enamels to create works that were like abstract expressionist paintings, using large sheets of metal and bright colors to create his works.

Paul Hultberg, the previously mentioned enamellist, created large wall hangings that resembled abstract paintings. His piece, *Johnson Together*, was 48 x 84 inches and featured seven panels with a variety of colors in various shapes and patterns. He was interested in the “juxtaposition of images and colors within fixed modules.” Enamels were typically used on a small scale—all the other objects in the group were small bowls or plates—but Hultberg “repeatedly used this erstwhile miniaturistic medium in works of grand scale.” Hultberg, like others in the exhibition, worked to capture spontaneity and the “randomness of natural processes” in his large pieces. He liked the challenge of firing quickly and working in a free form way that allowed the “natural behavior of glass, metal and heat” to determine the pattern on his large works. He enjoyed the “sense of risk” that working with delicate enamels provided. His works, while infused with a sense of landscape, seemed more to “embody the feeling of natural phenomena—the events of light and space, the very rhythms of creation...” While Hultberg’s work was like a landscape by an abstract expressionist, it was just one more piece in a large exhibition, passed over in a review for something more humorous or nostalgic.<sup>cix</sup>

Also passed over for its lack of connection to a larger story was the group of mosaic. A pair of objects rather than a group, mosaic contained only two

objects by two artists. Glen Michaels had a black shale mosaic titled, *Moon Crater #2*, that brought together dark pieces of stone into a swirling pattern, resembling the pocked surface of the moon. Though there was no color variation, the patterns kept the eye entertained and constantly in motion, as though searching for something else beyond the carefully placed stones.<sup>cx</sup>

Michaels' fellow mosaicist, Aleksandra Kasuba, created large works as well. Her piece was 60 x 72 inches, made of white marble and titled *The Book*. It did look like a large book made of paving stones, as though it were some weighty tome with instructions for life. Her goal was to suggest "ridges left in sand by wind or sea" in the ripples, points, and lines in her large works. While highly technically skilled, much like enamels, mosaics were overlooked for being too small a grouping in an exhibition that was large and over the top in all other aspects. The pieces were beautiful and artistic, but did not tell a story reviewers and visitors found they could relate to. The exhibition was large and covered a broad group of crafts, but each piece told a part of the new developments in craft in the United States.<sup>cx</sup>

This broad group of crafts was in some ways too broad. Because of the excessive size of OBJECTS: USA, it made it difficult for reviewers and viewers to see everything and gain a truly comprehensive understanding of the changing status of crafts in the United States. The size also limited the time spent in each venue because John Brown, the traveling curator, and others needed to allot enough time for set up, take down, and travel. While this was normal for any exhibition, OBJECTS: USA spent as much time in preparatory status as it did on

view to the public. This excessive size also limited the New York showing of the exhibition. The exhibition was housed at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, but the museum was not large enough, so the objects that could not be displayed were shown in a continuous slide show, further limiting understanding and interaction with the objects.<sup>cxii</sup>

This, however, was the only limitation, and OBJECTS: USA captured the imagination of America and led people to consider their hobbies as craft. One woman went so far as to request that Lee Nordness come to her house on his next trip to Wisconsin to examine her latch-hook rug and give his opinion as to its worthiness as a craft object. Through OBJECTS: USA the country understood craft as art and the craftsman as an artisan, changing centuries-old opinions about the purpose and necessity of craft in daily life.<sup>cxiii</sup>

When brought together the crafts of the country spoke of both the old and new, the exciting and mundane, and the familiar and unknown stories of everyone in the United States, not just the makers. Through OBJECTS: USA Johnson's Wax brought "into clearer focus the current dramatic changes...influencing the creative world of contemporary artist-craftsmen in America." Thought up by Lee Nordness, the support of Johnson's Wax made the exhibition a reality, bringing to the nation the "new breed" of craftsmen who made a "deliberate choice" to make craft their "field of creativity" rebelling against fine arts and the computer age simultaneously.<sup>cxiv</sup>

OBJECTS: USA was a phenomenal, groundbreaking show that told not just the stories of the over five hundred artists in it, but also the stories of



everyone who saw it. It received rave reviews, broke crowd records, and revealed many of the previously unknown artists of the studio craft movement. There were objects that were funny and exciting, others that were poignant and nostalgic, and others still that were breath taking, overwhelming, shocking and beautiful. The exhibition touched on every emotion through its vastness. No longer tucked away in rural America, craft moved into the mainstream, becoming part of national collections and inspiring art collectors to become craft collectors.<sup>cxv</sup>

By the time OBJECTS: USA reached the Museum of Contemporary Craft in New York in June of 1972, over half a million people had seen it. Reports came in constantly of the number of people who saw the exhibition, and that these large numbers often broke previous attendance numbers for the museums where it was exhibited. These records were broken because OBJECTS: USA was new, innovative, and said something about America. It was an exhibition that revealed not just what craftsmen were doing, but the direction America was heading. It touched hearts, changed minds, and made art accessible in a way that no other exhibition, not even ART: USA, had. OBJECTS: USA presented studio craft as a truly American art form.<sup>cxvi</sup>

The exhibition was “gigantic, kooky, ravishingly beautiful, [and] blindingly contemporary.”<sup>cxvii</sup> From the moment it was previewed in the fall of 1969 to the final exhibition before the collection was dispersed about the country in 1976, OBJECTS: USA continually surprised, excited, and awoke audiences to the powerful work of studio craft in the United States. When viewed almost ten years

after its conception as an exhibition of craft, OBJECTS: USA still represented the “explosion of innovative activity” that took place in studio craft in the late 1960s. The Johnson Collection documented the “remarkable period” of growth in studio craft and emphasized the importance of studio craft in the art world. Not just exciting for art collectors and craft makers, OBJECTS: USA touched something deeper in the American psyche. It revealed creativity and passion with the independence associated with American attitudes. It proved that Americans were capable of making art forms that were the same quality as European artworks. The surprise and excitement of the European tour helped solidify this idea. OBJECTS: USA pulled the disparate parts of the studio craft movement together and presented them as a unified, American whole. It created pride in American art work and looked toward an inventive and creative future.<sup>cxviii</sup>

In an age where there were deep concerns about science overtaking all aspects of life, a connection to handmade works alleviated those concerns. Craftsmen stepped away from the “computer age” and worked with their hands, eschewing automation, but not necessarily the machine. Moving away from cities, teaching at universities, where they explored ideas without worry about funding, and incorporating social ideas into their work elevated craft to the level of fine art. Crafts, as presented in OBJECTS: USA, made the world a different place by connecting the past to the present through art. Familiar forms and traditional materials were transformed into beautiful works of art that captured hearts and imaginations. Not just groundbreaking for bringing all craft media to the United States on an unprecedented level, it was groundbreaking for the ideas

it presented. Nordness and Johnson's Wax saw the brilliance in studio craft and brought it to the American public. The reaction was astoundingly grateful.

OBJECTS: USA was the definition of being American. Americans now had their own brand of art, based on past traditions, but with a unique twist that made it very American. OBJECTS: USA captured American pride and ingenuity in an ambitious exhibition of 308 artists and over 500 objects.<sup>cxix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Johnson's Wax was the unofficial name of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. and was used interchangeably in writings at the time. Today, the official corporate name is SC Johnson: A Family Company.

<sup>ii</sup> "An Art Program for S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc.," prospectus prepared by Lee Nordness, February 13, 1968. Accessed: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Lee Nordness business records and papers, [ca. 1950-1974], Box 10. (Hereafter, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, will be referred to as AAA, SI. Lee Nordness business records and papers, [ca 1950-1974] will be referred to as L.N. Papers.)

<sup>iii</sup> Meyer Berger, "About New York," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1955; David McLane, "Richard Kollmar subsidizes struggling painters to produce works at prices all can afford," *Sunday News*, June 15, 1952. Accessed, AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 1.

<sup>iv</sup> "Resume for Lee Nordness," c. 1970-1979; John Vorhees, "Reasonably-Priced Art Sells," *Look and Listen*, n.d. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Boxes 11 and 1.

<sup>v</sup> "Biographical Data on Lee Nordness," n.d. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 12.

<sup>vi</sup> Paul Smith, interview with Gloria Dunlap, April 23, 2010, Washington, DC.

<sup>vii</sup> "Biographical Data on Lee Nordness," n.d. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 12.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*; Lee Nordness to Wendell Castle, April 10, 1968. Accessed: AAA, SI, Wendell Castle Papers, Box 1, Correspondence, Jan-May 1968.

<sup>ix</sup> "An Art Program for S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc.," prospectus prepared by Lee Nordness, February 13, 1968. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 10; Lloyd Herman, *Art That Works* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 16.

<sup>x</sup> The Museum of Contemporary Crafts is today the Museum of Arts and Design. It has gone through two name-changes since its founding in 1956, but will be referred to as the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in this work.

<sup>xi</sup> Paul Smith, interview with Gloria Dunlap, April 23, 2010, Washington, DC.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*; Herman, *Art That Works*, 16; "Biographical Data on Lee Nordness," n.d. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 12.

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- <sup>xiii</sup> Paul Smith, interview with Gloria Dunlap, April 23, 2010, Washington, DC.
- <sup>xiv</sup> “An Art Program for S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc.,” prospectus prepared by Lee Nordness, February 13, 1968. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 10.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xviii</sup> “Outline for Suggested Remarks by Samuel C. Johnson at Press Conference Announcing OBJECTS: USA,” Thursday, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1968. Accessed: S.C. Johnson: A Family Company Archives, Racine, WI. (Hereafter S.C. Johnson: A Family Company Archives, Racine, WI, will be referred to as S.C. Johnson Archives.)
- <sup>xix</sup> “Johnson Wax Assembles Collection of Contemporary American Crafts,” Press Release, Carl Byoir and Associates, New York, n.d. Accessed: S.C. Johnson Archives.
- <sup>xx</sup> Ibid.
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<sup>xxvii</sup> “An Art Program for S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc.,” Lee Nordness, February 13, 1968. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 10.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Robert Warn to Lee Nordness, October 22, 1968; Letters regarding OBJECTS: USA, various authors and dates. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 10.

<sup>xxix</sup> Orrell Thompson to Samuel C. Johnson, October 28, 1968. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 10.

<sup>xxx</sup> Letters regarding OBJECTS: USA, various authors and dates. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 10.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Lloyd Herman to Lee Nordness, n.d. Smithsonian Institution Archives, National Collection of Fine Arts Central Administrative File. Records 1908-1974, Box 42.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Letters regarding OBJECTS: USA, various authors and dates. Accessed: AAA, SI, L.N. Papers, Box 10.

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