

# Stops Along the Craft Line

by Richard Rhodes

Craft was inescapable in the fall of 2005. The Art Gallery of Ontario was presenting *Catherine the Great: Arts for the Empire*, a massive hulk of a show that was part of a partnership with the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. At the time, the Hermitage was involved in assembling major tours of works from its collection as part of a decade-long coming out party for the new Russia—celebrated with highlights from the old Russia—after the dour and sometimes terrifying seventy-five-year Soviet interregnum.

These were touring treasures indeed. The popular star of the AGO show was a long and lovely Romanov Coronation Coach built in Paris at the Royal Gobelins Factory in the early eighteenth century. Constructed from oak and ash and beech and walnut, it was a hardwood wonder slung on a rolling architecture of iron and steel decorated with bronze, silver, glass, leather, silk, and gilt. The list of materials evokes richness itself, but itemization alone doesn't quite do justice to the impact of seeing the hand-tooled bubble of power and luxury in the flesh. This was a portable palace finished in exquisite detail, literally fit for kings and queens, and eloquently speaking inside and out for the wealth of a nation and the due glory of its rulers. The coach with its loving, elevated finish, was an embodiment of divine rights and gifts, a sign system for power and glory, constructed in a similar spirit of homage to what once went into the making of medieval cathedrals.

The same held true for the other two hundred objects in the exhibition. Each and every one of them was a glory: a snuff box layered and patterned with gold, lazuli, glass and enamel; bedroom furniture showing off the finest articulations of Tula steel; a box from China that otherwise was a metal crab in gilded silver and filigree; washes of silk and satin draperies; rare woods carved and joined with impressive ingenuity. The net effect was more than pomp: it was an articulated belief system where wealth and finery communicated an idea of service—to God, to the Queen, and to the graces of art and talent. It was, almost exclusively, a handmade world filled by objects with no easy path to duplication. Time moved slowly and in one direction across the surfaces of things that possessed immediacy, intimacy, and a drive for transformation beyond themselves.

They belonged to a world different from the modern world, to a hole in history. Any resurrection of craft in contemporary art also occupies that hole in history. Craft,

among other things, is an extension of magic and mystery and a connection to a more integrated universe, one where “well made” is synonymous with “well done.” It carries a long attachment to the idea of intrinsic value. This root identity of craft-related art can be problematic in a contemporary art framework where the boundaries of artmaking have been revolutionized by avant-garde aesthetics, new media production and, some would say, historical necessity. In this context, nothing can seem so dispiriting as an art object grounded in appealing surface finish and an unquestioning embrace of tradition. It belongs to Catherine’s world, voicing a past that belongs to an era of fixed beliefs and absolute hierarchies. Fundamentally out of time, such art, made now, sells human circumstance and imagination short.

This foot-dragging variety of craft is what generates the sometimes negative connotations around the “c” word that can seem so out of step with the improvisational energies of contemporary art. There is room for a knowing joke that adds craft to the scatological lexicon, as the title of this exhibition does, but, that said, craft has an important countervailing history in relation to modernism that runs on its own revolutionary circuit, beginning with the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, which functioned as a resistance to mass production and industrialization. For William Morris, the movement’s British leader, craft and artisanship were means to combat the falling social, moral, and aesthetic standards of an industrial culture and economy. Craft and its practitioners were regarded as humanizing forces in an increasingly dehumanized world.

There is a history in contemporary art that returns again and again to this positive formulation of the craft enterprise. Whether the Muralism of the 1930s, feminist practices of the 1960s and ’70s, gay crafting, or the anti-war, anti-capitalist, pro-environmentalist activism of the contemporary Craftism movement, or the glorious bottle cap tapestries of the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, craft production—as opposed to the hierarchy-ensconced world of commercialized art production—serves as a vehicle for shaping a softer, wider, more politically responsive society that is mindful of the myriad dimensions of diversity in a globalized world. Craft, as a ubiquitous human resource, represents a move in the direction of fair trade. It is the friendly face of a livable future. It doesn’t look back. It looks ahead.