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# Vessels of Muliebrity

Naomi R. Peterson 3164565

University of Wyoming, npeter12@uwyo.edu

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'Craft' is often considered unimportant or inconsequential in the art world. It is often associated with functional and decorative work, or low media such as ceramics, textiles or glass. It is rarely mentioned when describing contemporary high or fine art. In *Art and Fear* by David Bayles and Ted Orland, craft is explained as the "visible edge of art". They consider it to be inextricably bound up in the making of fine art, the necessary component in a work that lends 'clarity'. They also discuss the idea that it is only through craft disciplines that a semblance of 'perfection' might be reached, because of the very repetitive nature of the fine craft making process. Where "art" can never be perfected because the emphasis is on the exploration, the journey of the artist through making, craft objects are made over and over and as skill grows, material perfection can be achieved.

Just as craft disciplines are currently underappreciated, women artists have not been considered equal to male artists throughout much of art history, even though they were just as essential in developing the art world that we know today. I address these notions of low art and the above assumptions because it is essential to examine the whole of art history, including the evolution of craft, when defining and appreciating our own and other cultures. In addition, I will illustrate this analysis through a complex and highly crafted ceramic tea set.

Craft and crafts are disappearing because of lack of interest, funds as well as importance in many people's minds. We use functional objects and the products of craft on a daily basis, but because of everyday use, mass production and the nature of commodity, they aren't seen as significant as fine art in museums and galleries. The DIY or the 'Do It Yourself' movement has rekindled the passion for crafts in some artists, but for others all too often the thought of "making" is met with the fear of failure. Creating is not only about the result, it is largely about

exploring and learning. This in turn promotes problem solving in seemingly unrelated fields such as math. However, although creativity is extremely valuable, especially within the context of education, art programs are disappearing from schools because of lack of funding. The misperception is that art disciplines are unimportant, and especially so when compared to the STEM disciplines.

The Arts and Crafts Movement was founded on the idea that handmade objects are important and that the techniques to make them should be preserved and passed on to future generations. This movement was in response to the industrial revolution and the rise of mass produced goods. William Morris was well known through his association with the British movement and championed the idea that objects of everyday use should be beautiful as well as functional. Because of the history behind the technique, as well as the skill that comes from experience in making crafts, handmade objects tend to last longer and are more beautiful than mass produced goods.

Women weren't and in some cases still aren't considered serious professional artists, unlike their male counterparts, though they contributed a great deal to art history. During the Arts and Crafts movement, women could surpass barriers, found their own businesses, and become successful engineers and professional artists. They were able to take part in art production, while other women outside of the movement were not allowed such opportunities. Similar to the Arts and Crafts movement, the Pattern and Decoration movement arose because of the marginalization of women and the negativity towards pattern and decoration from Western cultures. By blurring the lines between design and fine art, women artists were able to create work that was rooted in nostalgia but modernist in theory. Unfortunately, whilst the

artists of the movement enjoyed success and created work that was well sought after throughout their time, after the 1980s critics largely dismissed the movement because it was associated with feminism, beauty and motifs that were associated with 'low' art or crafts such as hearts and Turkish flowers.

'Feminine' objects are considered 'pretty' but do not usually fit into the realm of fine art. 'Pretty' is a cringe-worthy word when associated with art, which could be understood by describing the Mona Lisa or other famous works as 'cute' or 'pretty' or even 'crafty'. Though they sound harmless enough, these words evoke patronizing tones and demeaning attitudes towards artists and their work. ~~because of this connection to craft and non-fine art.~~ Often, work that is considered feminine and therefore 'low' contains some kind of floral imagery, such as the floral paintings during the reign of the hierarchy of genres, when women were relegated to painting still lifes, or other paintings with limited concepts and content, instead of the historical paintings that male artists were exclusively allowed to create. Though these flowered paintings are incredibly intricate and beautiful, they are also reminders of what women were limited to do during this time. Pattern and decoration, floral imagery, functional objects such as tea sets and even certain colors are still to this day, deemed low, feminine and crafty.

For the Japanese, their culture was rooted in clay, dating back to the Neolithic period, far before the creation of the Japanese language. In addition, the Chinese, Cretan, Greek, Persian, Mayan and Korean cultures are also well known for their long traditions, and evolutions involving ceramic art. Artifacts found around the world are evidence that ceramics played a huge role in the advancement of civilization. Ceramic vessels allowed people to cook,

store and transport water and food which led to our evolution as a species as well as the advancement of societies.

The tea set has roots stretching back centuries in Eastern and Western cultures. The first recorded tea set originated in China during the Han Dynasty from 206-220 BC. Made of porcelain, it was used for medicinal purposes rather than for pleasure. Perhaps one of the most well-known styles originating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Yixing teapot, is left unglazed and is an important component to fine tea drinking because of the microscopic holes in the surface that allows the vessel to adapt to changes in temperature and adds depth in fragrance and taste to the tea. In Japanese culture, the tea ceremony or the Way of Tea is seen as an art form. Originating with the Samurai culture, the tea drinking vessels themselves as well as the ceremony, are representative of Buddhist ideas such as non-duality. The ceremony was so important that the Japanese people started building rooms for this purpose alone. In English tea culture, there are different customs depending on the time of day that are deeply engrained in daily life. For the upper class in the 1830s and 40s, lunch consisted of a light meal at noon, followed by dinner, served no earlier than 7:30 pm, the long expanse of time between meals resulted in the duchess of Bedford, Anna Maria Russell originating the practice of Afternoon Tea, according to legends.

I combined these two ideas that describe 'low' art, functional and feminine, into a tea set that is not used the traditional way with liquid tea, but instead holds the ideas of centuries of history, skill and culture. ~~which is useful in its own right.~~ Another important component to the tea set I created is the use of the William Morris pattern that contains floral imagery and is decorative in nature. By carving out the pattern and negating the function of the cup, I am

asking the viewer to 'use' the cup in a different way by considering its different ideas and components. The cup and teapot are thrown on the wheel then trimmed and constructed by hand to attach components such as a pedestal foot and a handle. The pattern is applied by hand as well, utilizing carving and shaping techniques while also being aware of the rate of which the clay is drying, which is always changing and moving. By making and using these craftsmanship techniques, I echo the handmade quality of the pattern as well as the idea that function and beauty should go hand in hand. I found it important to incorporate the medium of clay not only because it is considered a low medium associated with craft and functional objects, but because ceramics possesses a long history that spans the globe and is intrinsic to the development of civilizations. B-clay, or a mix of porcelain and stoneware, was appropriate to use because of the fusion of ideas regarding porcelain that is associated with ~~sculpture or~~ more elevated functional pieces such as fine china, and stoneware that is usually darker, rougher and used for more common items. As for the surface of the tea set, I decided to use the centuries old Celadon glaze, not only for its semi-transparent nature, which reveals texture and surface underneath so well, but also for its long history. Traditionally an olive or pale green color, Celadon originated in China and was sought after for centuries because of its resemblance to jade, which is considered the most valuable material in traditional Chinese culture. ~~It is a beautiful, stable glaze that shows the nature of the clay body underneath, demonstrating how invaluable it has been for potters to use for centuries. ???~~

Many assume that craft objects, including functional wares, are insignificant. However, most have a long history involving change of shape, material and value, which is important to consider because it is tied to our evolution as a species. Art has played a vital role in the

progress of history, and though craft is sometimes seen as frivolous and trivial in the face of future advancement, looking back at how it has helped us shape our world today can help us grow in numerous fields including education. The nature of our profit driven society today is to produce the things we use cheaper and more efficiently. If we allow craft and the arts to be swallowed up by capitalism, the arts as we know it could cease to exist. If everyone were to appreciate craft, including the craft of different cultures, we would gain an understanding of ourselves as a species rather than be defined by divisions in cultures.