



Crafting America

ARTISTS AND OBJECTS 1940 TO TODAY

Glenn Adamson Jen Padgett



Acknowledgments

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On Reliquaries and Self-Evident Truths

Bernard L. Herman

The visual gravity of Andy Paiko's blown-glass reliquaries pulls viewers into their orbits. Elegant canisters, pedestals for fragments foraged or fabricated, they bend light to the will of the contemplative imagination, concentrating vision into meditation, concealing as much as they reveal. His are alchemical creations that nudge us off-balance. In our flailing attempts to re-center ourselves, they compel us to recalibrate what we might think and what we might know.

Paiko's constructions spark considerations of the reliquary: how, as metaphor, it suggests fluid possibilities for how objects inform; how we see and know the worlds we inhabit. It's the work that numinous objects do. Their presence draws a viewer into a moment of wonder and redirects them toward reflection and understanding. The idea of the reliquary as metaphor enables alternative perspectives for craft. First, it positions the object as a singular expression of the maker's hand and mind in a particular moment of focused veneration. That positioning engages the craft object as a tangible index to a system of values and beliefs around the mental and physical process of making. Second, understanding the craft object as a reliquary for process enlivens it, placing abstract values within reach of the senses. Thus, the reliquary concentrates and amplifies encounter. Placing these ideas in conversation with modern and contemporary craft cultivates a perspective that dissolves arbitrary distinctions between thing, action, and thought. Third, the reliquary, through the work it does as both container and threshold for the critical imagination, emancipates the object from limiting narratives of utility and handwork.

At the outset, I am mindful that *art* is a noun, and that *craft* is both a noun and a verb. Art privileges the object; craft balances the object with process—skill, knowledge, and labor. When we engage with craft, we expect encounters with how things are as well as what they are. Considering Paiko's reliquaries, I reflect on the creativity and skill that brought them into being. They translate

abstract ideas into tangibility and unsettle what we might think of as the self-evident truths about the imaginative work of contemporary craft. Self-evident truths are so deeply naturalized and so unstated that we do not see them until they are self-consciously revealed through acts and objects that destabilize expectations around medium and form. Michelle Erickson's *Koi Junk Teapot* (2009), for example, seems an impossible object until it is understood as transgressing self-evident associations with social ritual, as an object that simultaneously quotes and denies utility.

Reliquaries are containers that hold objects of veneration, mystery, and belief. Jars, vases, boxes, vessels of all sorts—they contain and amplify wonder and inspire reflection. Their cousins are many: canopic jars, cabinets of curiosity, ossuaries, even cardboard shoeboxes crammed with personal ephemera and relegated to the back of a closet shelf. Reliquaries evoke the sacred through the mystery of their contents. Craft objects extend this work through gesture. As things they gesture through the materiality of form, medium, ornament, and iconography toward associations (and disruptions) of utility, commodity, and symbol. As *made* things, they gesture toward a maker's skills in design, fabrication, and manipulation. I am aware here of the experience of sensation and connection felt when my fingers trace the grooves on the interior of a thrown pot, or my eyes track the intricacies of woven fabric, inlaid wood, or hammered metal. Thus, the craft object as reliquary renders the transient immediacy of gesture fixed and accessible.

Reliquaries do not need to be vessels that contain venerated objects. They can also do their work through metaphor, evocation, and analogy. Ronald Lockett's work *Sarah Lockett's Roses* (1997), created shortly before his death in 1998, mourns the loss of his beloved great-grandmother. The quilt-like construction is fashioned from metal siding foraged from surrounding buildings. It serves a reliquary function through recuperation, association, and meditation—all brought together

Paiko, *Reliquary*
c. 2013. Blown,
cut, and assembled
in walnut; maple;
brass; woodpecker
feathers; poison oak seeds;
oil paint. 24½ × 6½ ×
10 in., 30¼ × 10 × 10 in.,
26½ × 8 × 8 in.
Courtesy of Wexler Gallery

around the idea of the “safe space” of the quilt. Not only does *Sarah Lockett’s Roses* contain the trace of an art form closely associated with comfort and spiritual healing in parts of the African American South, but it also contains a more particular association: flowers that embody the dooryard garden Sarah Lockett tended. Ronald Lockett harvested the metal used in the composition from the disintegrating buildings of neighboring family members who had moved away. The relic content of Lockett’s late work resides in the efficacy it invoked as the artist struggled with grief and his own declining health.

Sarah Lockett’s Roses blurs the categories of relic and reliquary, contents and container, serving as medium, representation, and revelation all at once. When we collapse distinctions between content and vessel, we are able to discern a relic trace of process present in all handmade objects. Form, texture, and composition draw us in. That mediating role finds expression in Sonya Clark’s *Beaded Prayers Project* (1999–present), a collaborative endeavor centered on the individual making of “beaded packets that contain [the participants’] prayers, wishes, hopes or dreams.”¹ We see hand and mind manifest in Joyce J. Scott’s “*Danger Done*” *Neckpiece* (1994), Warren MacKenzie’s glazed stoneware *Charger* (1998), Anni Albers’s linen and metallic thread weaving *La Luz I* (1947), and Michael Peterson’s carved and sandblasted

burl *Coastal Stack XV* (2017). The residue of gesture, technique, and thought is a relic truth that resides within all of these objects, disclosing the distinctive reliquary function of craft.

The reliquary reveals a fundamental paradox inherent to all handmade objects. As things they are concrete, and in their solidity they possess a certain material certainty; as frames and containers they are ambiguous, and their meanings contingent, fluid, and affecting. Their power resides not just in what they are but also in how they bring wonder into view. In the distant past, reliquaries and the relics they contained were typically objects of veneration, believed to be miraculous, sacred, rare, and efficacious. When I think about the work of craft, I am drawn to reliquaries that push the boundaries of this tradition but adhere to the celebration of wonder. Even as they concentrate attention, reliquaries have the potential to throw convention and engagement off-balance, commanding a different order of recognition.

A reliquary is an ecstatic object—it evokes sudden, overwhelming feeling within frameworks of power and the sacred. A reliquary removes us from the world of the self and the self-evident. The reliquary positions the relic outside of time—as the museum gallery, with its crafted light and display, does for art. Relic meditations proceed from moments of emotional engagement, prompting contemplation of the sacred. But because relics on



Ronald Lockett with
Sarah Lockett’s Roses, 1997.
Courtesy of Souls Grown
Deep Foundation



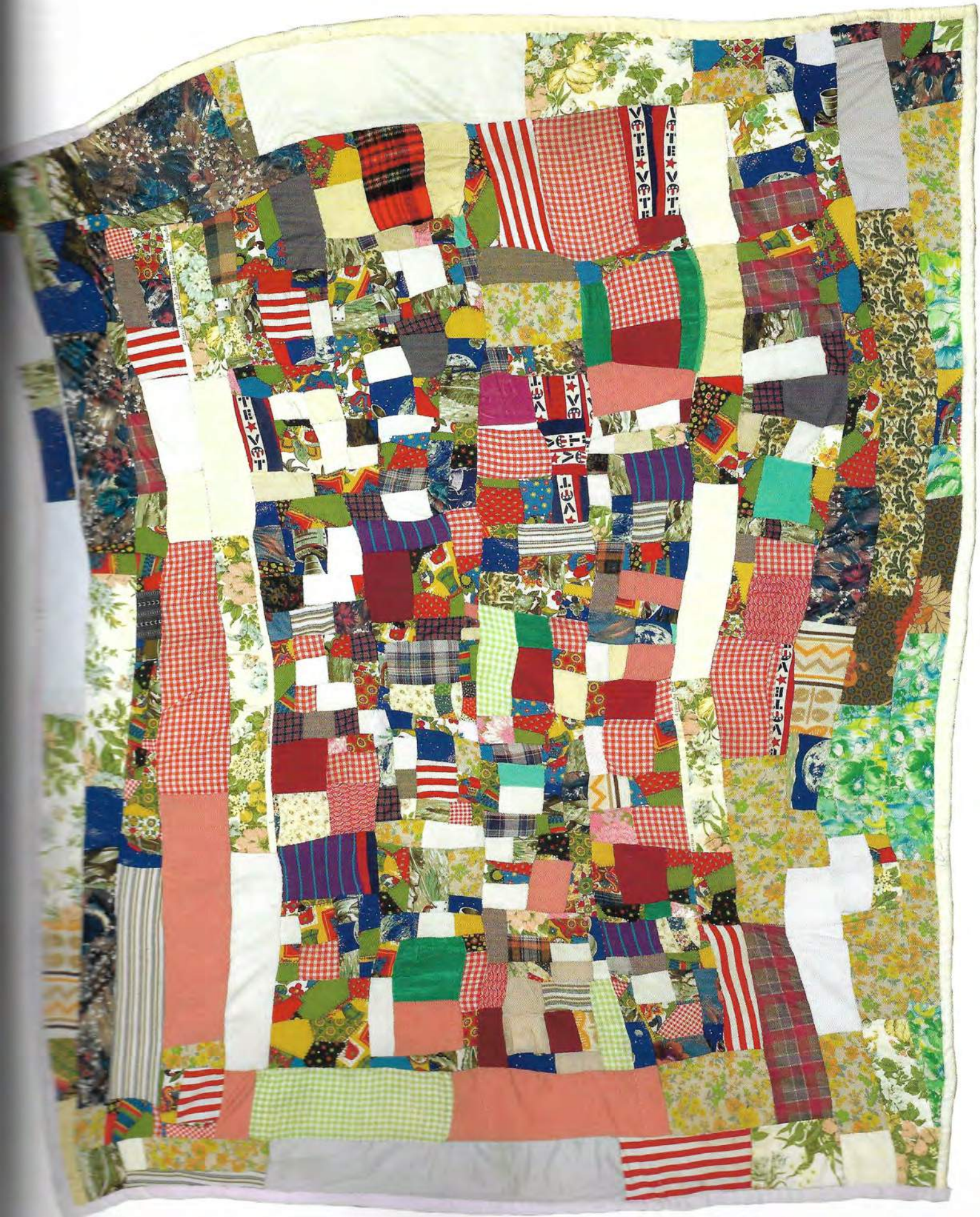
Kochansky, *Ghost*
 Silk organza
 Hand and
 Machine
 Reproductions
 of photographs,
 Private

their own are humble, fragmented objects—a bit of bone, a scrap of cloth, a splinter of wood, a tooth—they do not rise to the level of veneration without the wrought and elaborated housing of the reliquary. Even as the reliquary celebrates the relic, it diminishes itself through an act of redirection as form, surface, and materials bend to the greater significance of celebrated content. Thus, the reliquary calls attention to itself through perpetual deference. In that cultivated humility, it makes greater mysteries visible.

Ellen Kochansky's transparent quilts, fashioned from organza, celebrate the normally unseen world of batting—the padding contained between the front and back of the quilt. In *Ghost Quilt* (2003), for example, she sandwiched the remains of a ruined plantation quilt between sewn layers that echo the log cabin pattern of the original. The semitranslucent organza, with the delicacy of the quoted ghostlike pattern, concentrates attention on the rough, coarsely combed raw cotton and frayed fibers. Kochansky acknowledges that her work serves as a reliquary in its invitation for a viewer's engagement in terms of pilgrimage and realization. Key to that encounter is the manner in which the reliquary only partially reveals its relic. "The small fragments seem all the more potent because they are not the whole thing," she said. "They are in there only to the extent that we know they are in there. We don't see them, or we don't acknowledge them. The more mysterious it is, which is how that framework works, the more invisible, hidden, mysterious, wrapped, stacked, bundled, rolled, whatever—the more mysterious it is, the more potent it becomes for the people who participate in it, for the people who see it."² The relic is something consumed through recurring acts of veneration. In craft, we venerate the manifest process of creative vision, realized through skill, applied to medium. Objects bring those relationships forward.

Quilts like those made by Irene Williams contain memory as well as mystery. She has explained how her quilts remember and inspire, beginning with the fabric from which they are made. Sitting on the porch of her home in central Alabama on a warm autumn afternoon, she observed:

The different kinds of material you get is got memories in it. It is. It's got memories. Just like you going to fill out a book, that's the way a quilt works. Just like you fill out a book with them, that's the way you fill out a quilt with them. You pad the quilt with memories. That's right. If I say, well I'm piecing on that quilt, just remember old times quilting. How you used to sit down with your mother and do these jobs. Your



Williams,
Sings, ca. 1975.
Polyester, 93 X
Crown Deep

art Reliquary,
scrimshaw,
quartz, felted
mule dog hair
objects,
fabricated
15 x 8 x 1 in.
Dow



memories is going in that quilt. Your memories is in that quilt. You remember . . . People usually don't believe that, but it is true. It's just like building a house. If you build that house, your memories is in the house. That's the truth.³

Williams's commentary focuses on the work that relics perform: how they make abstract beliefs visible and render the ordinary extraordinary. A sacred relic renders faith tangible; its reliquary, in all its glory, is a paradoxically material thing, bringing substance to power and praise.

The very idea of a reliquary, then, evokes associations with the sacred. As historian Teresa Barnett has observed, relics perform "not simply as representations of the past but as the necessary means of negotiating affective transactions with the past—as objects that worked to do things that

could be done in no other way."⁴ The truth of reliquaries is not self-evident but rather intuited through imagination, affect, and belief. A reliquary is the producer of a social imaginary. It makes visible and concrete the ways that people perceive themselves and their systems of values in relationship to others, articulating community.⁵

Relics and reliquaries are grounded in narrative and storytelling. Ron Ho demonstrates this point in his *"Tibetan Reliquary" Necklace* (2012). The stone beads, Tibetan iron keys, and stone ear-plug incorporated into the work are presented as found objects, although "foraged" or "scouted" may describe the process better.⁶ The theme that undergirds Ho's work, artist Peter Olsen noted, is the turning of the object to narrative purpose: "The germ of many of his pieces [has] started with objects or with the idea of how you would turn an object into a story."⁷ Whatever the objects may

Judith Schaechter
Immigration Policy
Stained and lead
26 × 20 in. Court
artist and Claire
Gallery, New York



mean for Ho, they ultimately inspire a story that is of the viewer's telling, a narration that makes mystery tangible. Craft process is one of those mysteries. Other works by Ho—for example, *Bear's Reliquary* (2008), which includes an "ulu knife, an [Inuit] snowshoe grip and a Tibetan reliquary containing the felted hair of the dog"—make this

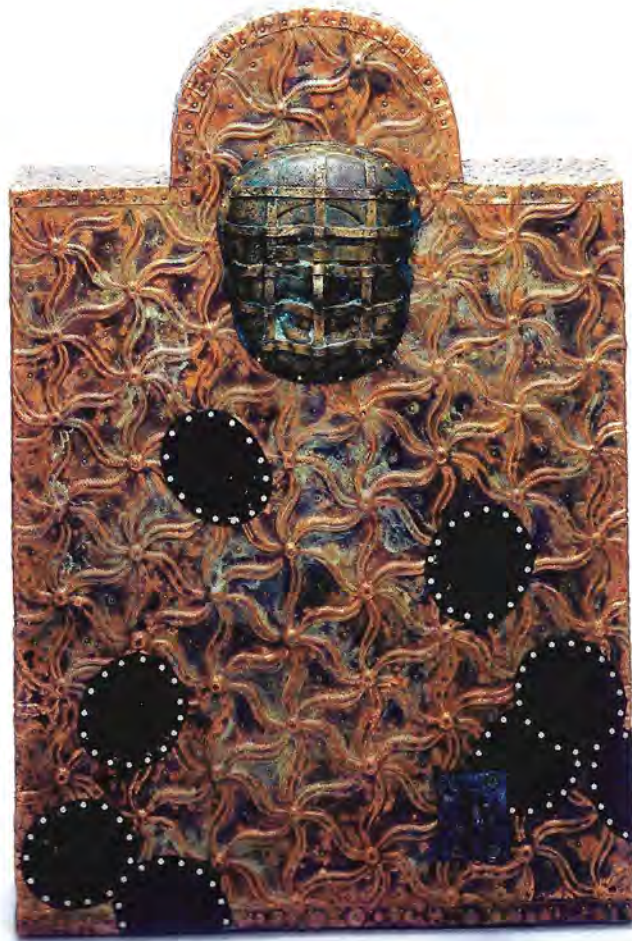
function explicit.⁸ Ho concentrates our attention on the object, enriched and enlivened through all of its attendant associations with the patron's personal biography and mourning for the passing of a beloved pet. The reliquary renders loss visible.

Judith Schaechter's stained-glass window *Immigration Policy* (2017) further exemplifies such

relationships. "It seems my work is centered on the idea of transforming the wretched into the beautiful," she writes, "in theme as well as design."⁹ Schaechter locates her work in an interplay between a challenging medium (stained glass) and often difficult narratives (in this instance, immigration). Describing the spiritual work of stained glass, she observes, "A radiant, transparent, glowing figure is not the same as a picture of a figure (which reflects light). It's a blatant reference to holiness or some type of 'supernatural' state of being." Thus, Schaechter's stained glass does the work of the reliquary in a different register, complicating understanding with mystery, empowering imagination in pursuit of revelation, playing off of deep histories of rhetoric and reflection in the service of ethical and aesthetic awareness.

Juan Logan has completed nearly eighty reliquaries since he first began crafting them in 1997. Unlike Paiko's reliquaries or Schaechter's stained glass, which are transparent and fragile, Logan's constructions are dense and weighty. "The idea

was all centered around something being held sacred or considered sacred," he said. "That whole notion of things that are sacred. *Please Save This*, that breadboard that I carved. That piece was all centered around a small glass bottle—a jar—that was given to me, that my grandfather in June of 1916 placed this piece of bread in along with a letter. And the letter says basically, 'Please save this. This is the last piece of bread my mother made the day before she died.' [. . .] That would have been my great-grandmother," Logan explained. "She was cooking for the family. I always thought that it was amazing that he thought to save this piece of bread and to write this note regarding it. When it was given to me decades later, it seemed appropriate these are the things they talked about being sacred. I carved this breadboard for that to rest in. I've given it to my son who lives up the street from me, but it's still in the family. . . . That's what a reliquary really is. Things that are held sacred."¹⁰ Logan's reliquaries invite the question of what constitutes the sacred.



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ronze,
el, and wood,
in. Courtesy

Sabrina Gschwandtner visualizes a rendition of the sacred through the stillness in her film quilts and installations. Her work captures histories of labor, particularly the work of women, through her appropriation of film editing as an art form linked to needlework. Her goal: "Drawing attention to things that need to be seen." "I want to pull out this one section and work with this one section of the film and honor it in some way," she elaborated. "Or, I want to take the overall tone of the film and critique it by cutting it together with something else. I think in terms of curating. The work is about what sections of film I've decided to work with and how I'm sewing them into a new form. It's like a form of reediting in the tradition of experimental film."¹¹ In alignment with the work of reliquaries, Gschwandtner's film quilts are conceived around connections to ideas of the sanctuary, the sacred, and the spiritual. Standing in front of one of her backlit pieces, a viewer bends to see not only the gestures of the maker's hand but also the imagery contained within the individual film frames. Layering gesture on gesture in the contemplative space of the object, the work leads us to an embodied and intimate understanding of material, time, labor, and curation.

We return to Andy Paiko. In conversation, he winnowed the sacred from theology and religion before discussing the role the reliquary plays in his work. There are three elements to the reliquary:



the relic, the vessel, and the space. Each carries its own functions. "I started putting things inside the jars," Paiko began, "realizing back then that the space inside the jar—it really didn't matter what the glass jar was, it could just be like a canning jar. It didn't matter if it was handmade. Of course, they looked good when they were ornate." The conversation then shifted: "The interesting part of it is the space inside, that's like this sacred space that's more important than the vessel itself. The vessel is

Gallery visitors view Gschwandtner's *Sanctuary Study 3: Dulac's 1927 The S and the Clergyman*, 35mm black-and-white and polyester three 45 in. Photograph by Venegas, courtesy Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery



Andy Paiko, *Reliquary Group*, 2011. Blown, sculpted, assembled, and etched glass; hair twine; wax; and four and fabricated objects of various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

like a membrane between what is kind of normal and what is sacred or special.”

The perceived power of reliquary space created its own challenges. “I’d collect bones and put spines in jars,” Paiko said, “coyote spines and skulls in jars, and tie that to ideas I had at the time.” But then “the idea of what to put in there and choosing the object to put in became more and more problematic. Like what was special and what was interesting enough or worthy enough to be inside that space. I couldn’t come up with anything specifically. It became harder and harder to make those choices, so I started to make those parts and pieces actually out of glass.” The crux of the reliquarist’s dilemma focused on what object should occupy “a space set aside out of time” and how the reliquary afforded a space for “a recontextualization of taking things out of the normal and making them more special. Holding them up and removing them from day-to-day stuff in the service of meditation.”¹²

Reliquary spaces perform stillness. Their function is to slow time and in that stillness make process visible. The reliquary makes process (creative and haptic) and idea (intended and implicated) visible through objects layered with stories. By bringing this metaphor to bear on the works assembled for *Crafting America*, we can better see how the crafted thing resonates: like lyric poetry, it calls attention to the device of its own making. The relic, in this instant of attention, is not the made thing itself but rather the process of its making.

What we discern beyond material presence—demonstrations of skill and creative process—often challenges a complacent viewer. Thus, Myra Militsch-Gray’s *Melting Teapot* (2005) offers two readings. On the one hand, the work transgresses function through its emphasis on medium and the dissolution of a familiar form; on the other, Militsch-Gray fuses one making process (melting) with another (hand-raising). Far from contradictory, her twinned commentaries foreground a representation of the mechanics and skill of artistic process. Marilyn Levine’s *Anne’s Jacket* (1990) carries the image of soft, comfortable fabric but is

actually sculpted in terracotta, wood, and metal. Darryl Montana’s grandly oversized Mardi Gras suit evokes the gigantic, even as Margaret De Patta’s *Pin* (1964) exemplifies the fineness and intimacy of the miniature. Both are presented here as made things, wonders large and small, not according to their surface functions as costume and accessory. None of these works are reliquaries in any obvious sense, but thinking of them in this way helps us to see how they slow time, enabling contemplation and perhaps a degree of disquiet surrounding the act of representation. All craft does a reliquary’s work by creating a space for mystery, reflection, and celebration—a space where the beauty of gesture, in hand and thought, is at once a self-evident truth and a venerated, revelatory, and transformative marvel.

NOTES

- 1 Sonya Clark, “The Beaded Prayers Project: Overview,” accessed March 7, 2020, <http://www.beadedprayersproject.com/overview.html>.
- 2 Ellen Kochansky, interview with author, August 30, 2019.
- 3 Irene Williams, interview with author, October 6, 2003.
- 4 Teresa Barnett, *Sacred Relic: Pieces of the Past in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 5.
- 5 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.
- 6 Bellevue Arts Museum, “Finding Inspiration, Creating Art from Found Objects,” *Seattle Times*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.seattletimes.com/sponsored/finding-inspiration-creating-art-from-found-objects/>.
- 7 Northwest Designer Craftsmen, “Ron Ho: Becoming Chinese, A Jeweler’s Tale,” posted on August 22, 2018, YouTube video, 28:44, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyd_pnzo_0.
- 8 Bellevue Arts Museum, “Finding Inspiration.”
- 9 Judith Schaechter, “Artist Statement,” accessed September 14, 2019, http://www.judithschaechter.com/?page_id=477.
- 10 Juan Logan, interview with author, August 23, 2019.
- 11 Sabrina Gschwandtner, interview with author, August 23, 2019.
- 12 Andy Paiko, interview with author, August 26, 2019.

What Is Craft?

Craft is as simple or complex as you want to make it. In its essence, it is an easy thing to understand: making things, skillfully. In the presence of a really well-crafted object, there is little room for doubt. Artisanal know-how serves as its own argument. Yet, on the base of this secure foundation, elaborate superstructures of history and culture have been constructed, and these are crisscrossed with questions: What is craft's relationship to tradition? To technology? To fine art? To gender and ethnicity? Many artists and scholars have considered these issues, opening up a whole discipline of thought. Our goal in this project is not to offer final or definitive answers but rather to show how some of the key ideas associated with craft have been put into practice in the United States. We begin with a consideration of a few core values, each of which has anchored the work of skilled artists while also letting their imaginations take flight.



OPPOSITE

Michelle Erickson

Koi Junk Teapot, 2009. Porcelain, colored earthenware agate, and indigenous clays, 12½ × 11 in. Seattle Art Museum, Howard Kottler Endowment for Ceramic Art

Roberto Lugo

Frederick Douglass / Arthur Ashe Urn, 2017. Porcelain, china paint, and gold luster, 18 × 11 × 11 in. Collection of Mark McDonald and Dwayne Resnick

The Pursuit of Happiness

It's exhilarating to see an object taking shape in the hands—and all the more so when that object is large in scale, intricate in form, or wild in conception. The challenge of making something truly spectacular pushes right up against the limits of skill to levels of technical difficulty and sheer invention that are breathtaking to behold.

The enjoyment of such extreme craft is that much more acute now that digital technology pervades our lives. Americans spend much of their time on screens. There's a lot of happiness to be found that way, but craft offers a deeper and richer form of interactivity, a conversational give-and-take between artist and material.

This inherent gratification is experienced above all by makers themselves—a connection between craft's material pleasures and its more political aspects. In the late nineteenth century, English designer William Morris proclaimed the value of “joy in labor.” He and his allies in the Arts and Crafts movement criticized industry for robbing workers of their dignity, of their satisfaction in a job well done. These concerns are more relevant than ever today as we seek alternatives to sweatshop exploitation on the one hand and dehumanized automation on the other.

The works in this concluding section of the exhibition do not confront these issues directly. Instead, they are fantastical, allowing for a deep plunge into their makers' creative visions. That very imaginative quality is a reminder of what people can do when they set their minds and hands to a specific purpose. Craft, at its best, is an inspiring demonstration of human ingenuity. No wonder it gives us such pleasure to watch it unfold.



Judy Kensley McKie

Monkey Chair, 1994. Walnut and bronze, 36 × 25 × 25 in.
Collection of Colleen and John Kotelly

Caught in the Act

As any craftsperson can tell you, making something well takes time: the years it takes to achieve mastery; the long hours, days, weeks, or even months that a single object may demand. Yet in most cases, we encounter a craftwork all at once. As Bernard L. Herman writes in his contribution to this volume, this compression of temporality is intrinsic to craft's power, lending it the quality of a reliquary—a vessel for its maker's skill and spirit.

Makers are well aware of this dynamic, and often they manipulate it to striking effect. Glass artist Andy Paiko (who serves as Herman's leading exemplar) creates bell jars, sometimes left empty, sometimes filled with handmade "specimens" evoking those of a historic curiosity cabinet. Within these enclosed microcosms, time seems suspended, creating an opportunity for extended reflection in all senses of the term. Paiko often nudges the viewer into that mindset by incorporating engraved motifs, including clockfaces and moon-phase diagrams. In the twenty-first century, when our attention is so regularly interrupted by distractions of all kinds, he offers a chance to get lost in another, more perfect world.

Temporality takes on a different guise in Anne Lemanski's and Arthur Hash's work, which contains a freeze-frame aesthetic, implying one moment taken from an extended narrative. Lemanski's *Tigris T-1* evokes a scene from a circus, with a tiger perched watchfully

atop a striped ball. The seemingly entertaining image has a serious intent as a tribute to an actual tiger, Avni (or T-1), who killed thirteen people over a two-year span in one Indian village and was eventually caught and shot dead. "The tiger balancing on the ball is a perfect symbol for man's need to control his environment," Lemanski says. She hopes to jar people into realizing how bizarre it is "to force an animal as powerful and magnificent as a tiger to walk on a ball for entertainment purposes."⁶

Lemanski's sculpture is executed in cut paper collaged over a hand-built armature—old-school skills—but has a subtly digital aspect, too, as its patterns were created by scanning straws sourced from an ethnic grocery near Lemanski's studio. Hash also finds novel aesthetic possibilities in new technology, having mastered the 3D printer as a tool. He uses this relatively new process to refresh the age-old genre of the still life. The bracelets seen here carry suggestively political titles (*Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water*, for example, is a biblical phrase referring to oppressed laborers) and seem to depict everyday objects in chaotic freefall. Hash positions the aperture for the wearer's arm in an unexpected, seemingly arbitrary way, so that in use, the pieces stage a narrative of oblique encounter between the tangible and the virtual.

Andy Paiko

Reliquary Group, 2020. Blown, sculpted, etched, lacquered, and assembled glass; twine; and wax; various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist





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