

# Pursuing Innovative Craft On the value of learning through doing

BY AMANDA GAME AND  
ELIZABETH GORING

IN THE FIRST decade of the 21st century, what kind of start-up organization chooses to call itself “Innovative Craft”? Signs of unease around the term *craft* have been visible since at least the 1980s, and a significant number of venerable institutions have altered their names over recent years in an attempt to achieve cultural legitimacy. The British Crafts Centre in London, established in 1967, assumed its current identity as Contemporary Applied Arts as early as 1985. New York’s American Craft Museum, founded as the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in 1956, was re-designated the Museum of Arts & Design in 2002. In 2007, the Cleveland Craft Centre in northeast England, which opened in 1984, was translated into the fashionably lower-case *mima* (the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art).

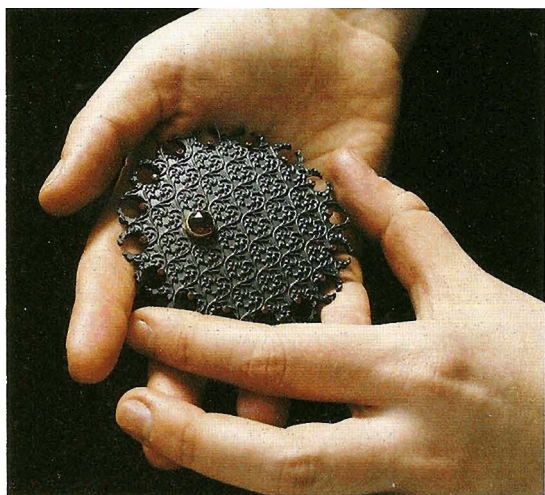
Despite this evident abandonment among our cultural institutions of craft, the word itself seems to be regaining currency.

Can we therefore feel confident that this time-hungry, oddly responsible form of art still has importance or significance in our high-speed world of contemporary visual culture? Richard Sennett’s recent book *The Craftsman* offers a brilliant, if at times nostalgic, analysis of the value of craft as an integrated working practice—the Ruskin model of hand, heart and mind—alongside his sense of the wider social value of this model.<sup>1</sup> The curators of highly respected museums worldwide continue to collect, interpret, and exhibit objects of our time derived from a craft tradition. In fact, certain institutions have expanded their collections: witness such major cultural institutions as the Museums of Fine Arts in Houston and Boston, with their respective acquisitions of the Helen Williams Drutt and Daphne Farago collections of contemporary jewelry; and the V&A in London, representing the work of more than 140

living goldsmiths and jewelers within their wider historical context in the newly opened William and Judith Bollinger Jewelry Gallery. Such developments eloquently demonstrate the value of contemporary work from a craft tradition to such institutions, as well as the powerful contribution of passionate collectors.

At the same time, the consumer, that master of the modern universe, seems increasingly drawn to the idiosyncratic world of small studio practice. At a conference in Sydney, Australia, in 2007, the BBC radio journalist Peter Day commented on the increasing importance of the distinctiveness and individuality offered by the small-batch production model for future retail markets.<sup>2</sup> The success of the Italian Slow Food movement was cited as an example. Such ideas are already emerging in a curatorial context through the work of organizations such as the UK crafts development organization, Craftspace, which recently initiated a project titled “Slow” in collaboration with the metal artist Helen Carnac. The project, which currently involves an interactive blog,<sup>3</sup> explores re-emerging ideas around time and value, and will eventually result in a traditional exhibition. The world of product design, too, is also aligning itself alongside the idea, if not the practice, of craft. Companies such as the internationally renowned design enterprise Droog, based in Amsterdam, and Electricwig, in Northern Ireland,<sup>4</sup> are blurring the boundaries between craft and design in highly imaginative ways, privileging the Ruskin-Sennett model of integrated workplace activity, and producing work of potential interest to Peter Day’s consumers seeking the distinctive and the unique.

Thus, the calculated choice of name made by the founding directors of the embryonic Innovative Craft in 2003 can be seen more clearly as a reflection of the *Zeitgeist*. The organization was established by three individuals from very different backgrounds in the public, private, and charitable sectors, but each has decades of experience working with makers and artists. We came together to explore how best to celebrate the highest achievement in craft, and how to demonstrate its value within national and international culture. We set out specifically to fill what we perceived as a



Shannon Tofts photograph of Glasgow jeweler Marianne Anderson’s hands holding an example of her work, 2006. From the exhibition “The Face of Craft: Portraying Scotland’s Makers,” produced by Innovative Craft, and presented at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, July–October 2006.

**It seems that making things, that most practical of engaged activities, is being systematically uncoupled from art training.**

crucial gap in provision: providing a space for intelligent communication between the maker and audiences. Our ultimate goal was to ensure that creative excellence evolving from craft of international standard, valued for its cultural significance, would reach a much wider audience ([www.innovativecraft.co.uk](http://www.innovativecraft.co.uk)).

Craft at its highest level appears to have become marginalized, and to have lost confidence in its status. It seems to us that, the more craft attempts to be something different, the more it tends to be consigned by others to the sidelines of artistic endeavor. In the UK, attempts to be taken seriously by the media meet an almost impenetrable barrier, apparently largely born of incomprehension and a significant degree of pre-conception. The spectacular success of the “Craft in America” project, especially its landmark PBS television series—which in 2008 won the prestigious Peabody Award as well as an Emmy nomination—has been inspiring and shows what is possible.<sup>5</sup> Our strategy, therefore, is to promote confidence in the sector, and renew a sense of its cultural value, by working with and through opinion formers with the ability both to recognize and reflect wider social interests. We want our audiences to articulate and engage with the important juxtaposition in our organization’s name, and to appreciate its acronym, IC: we aspire to be about new ways of seeing.

In this respect, opportunities for craft of international standard to be seen and fully appreciated are unacceptably limited. The national development agency for contemporary crafts in the UK, the Crafts Council, has abandoned its focal London gallery space, a keenly felt loss. Meanwhile, most of the existing presenting institutions are divided into increasingly constrained camps. The public sector, private enterprise, and academe have their own narrowly defined agendas, which can frustrate attempts to celebrate excellence; but while political, commercial, and educational perspectives each have value, taken individually they do not provide the healthiest environment within which to

demonstrate the intrinsic value of craft. Among the public institutions of the UK at least, the quality and range of exhibitions exploring contemporary craft is uneven in intention and execution, in the attempt to meet inflexible political imperatives. In the commercial sector, the network of dealers and galleries supplying the essential lifeblood to the economic health of the maker remains fragile, especially in the current climate.

One might think that the education system would promote some essential spirit of craft knowledge in the 21st century among the next generation of thinkers, writers, curators, consumers, and, most crucially, young artists. However, in the UK, the art colleges no longer consider the practice of art to be as significant as theory; it is easier to win funding for thinking about the meaning of work than actually making it. Such an ethos leads craft down a blind alley when, in Scotland, we have just lost our last art college ceramics department. It seems that making things, that most practical of engaged activities, is being systematically uncoupled from art training. The art of craft, like the craft of craft, is being strangled at the very moment when it appears to be enjoying greater social regard.

Such complexity of practice is hard to define, and thus easily lost. The archetypal craftsperson, in order to create significant, animated work, must endure patient, demanding, and often repetitive labor. One recalls the lines from W. H. Auden’s poem *The Novelist*: “...to achieve his lightest wish, he must/ Become the whole of boredom.”<sup>6</sup>

Innovative craft is, by dictionary definition, a kind of change-making dexterity. What the organization hopes to achieve is a clear demonstration of the value of *doing* as a way of learning. By focusing on the tangible presentation of objects, and their inherent ideas, within a physical space, we will work with a wide range of people to remain alert to the potential intersection of ideas, words, and images. We will attempt to articulate the extraordinary importance of not throwing out what we have only just begun to understand: the nature of craft. ●

*Amanda Game and Elizabeth Goring, two of Innovative Craft’s co-directors, are freelance curators, writers, and consultants.*

1. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
2. See <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com> “Smart Works: Design and the Handmade,” a symposium held March 30, 31, and April 1, 2007, at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.
3. [www.makingaslowrevolution.wordpress.com](http://www.makingaslowrevolution.wordpress.com)
4. See <http://www.droog.com> and <http://www.electricwig.com>
5. See <http://www.craftinamerica.org>
6. *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writing 1927–1932* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988).