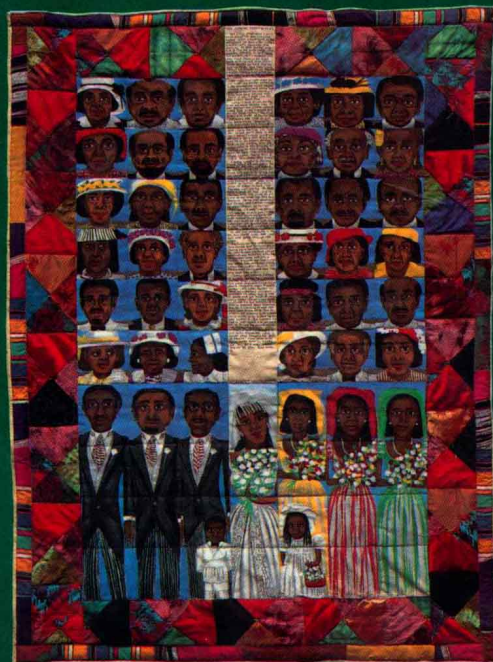


Contemporary American Craft Art

A Collector's Guide

Barbara Mayer

Foreword by
Lloyd E. Herman



CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN
CRAFT ART
A COLLECTOR'S GUIDE

BARBARA MAYER



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FOREWORD

Collecting can be a passion for many—even an obsession. For others it is a more conscious, controllable hobby—a chosen interest in owning a particular type of thing, the search for which affords a great deal of pleasure.

I'm not a collector, but an accumulator. My parents always said that I'd become a junkman because I was always dragging home someone else's castoffs, sure that a wooden chair or worn-out watering can still had value or could be made into something useful. But instead of becoming a junkman, I went to work at the Smithsonian Institution—sometimes called the “nation's attic.” There, people's castoffs, as well as their valuable collections of art, do have value in telling a nation about its history and culture.

During the fifteen years I directed the Renwick Gallery, (the center for American craft art in the Smithsonian's complex of national museums), I got to know many collectors. Whether they collected Navajo rugs or contemporary glass sculpture, they taught me something about the collecting impulse. Some collectors end up giving their collections to museums. Others even collect with museums in mind.

I'm thinking right now of Edward “Bud” Jacobson, a Phoenix attorney who is also a cultural leader in his city. He has chosen the museums of Phoenix as the beneficiaries of his

charitable efforts just as other civic-minded donors choose a hospital or university as a favorite charity. But Jacobson doesn't collect only money for museums, he collects objects. When he realized that the Heard Museum, with its wonderful American Indian collections, could use a collection of African art, he set about collecting it. He also collected French drawings for the Phoenix Museum of Art, and when I met him, he was learning all about turned wood bowls and collecting the best contemporary examples to give to a museum.

Though Jacobson is methodical in studying whatever he has decided to collect, his study is not without love of the objects he buys. That is essential to collecting and, in fact, governs why and how most collectors get involved. Few begin as rationally as Jacobson.

Robert and Jean Pfannebecker have one of the nation's most impressive private collections of contemporary American crafts. Unlike Jacobson's effort to buy at least one turned bowl by every American master, the Pfannebeckers have collected a number of objects by a few artists, starting when the artists were very young—some still in college. Bob Pfannebecker likes to spot new talent, and began to develop what museum people call “in-depth” collections of work by several artists. Though the Pfannebeckers responded initially to the talent of their young discoveries, their

ongoing friendship with artists has increased the joy they take in collecting. Many collectors especially enjoy sharing through friendship the creative spirit with which the artists fill their work.

How does someone become a collector? Most collectors seem to begin by looking at things—by shopping, really. It may be a beautiful ceramic bowl at a craft fair that will be just right for that vacant spot on the mantel. Or it might be a glass candlestick that will complement the good china. But the shopper keeps on going to other stores, craft fairs or galleries, and there are always new, interesting or beautiful things for sale. If the buyer has money to indulge fantasy, more of those wonderful objects come home and are displayed proudly. It isn't a collection yet, but it soon will be one.

Many of the lenders of objects to Renwick Gallery exhibitions didn't think of themselves as collectors. They just liked ceramic bowls, or objects decorated with frogs or sculptural baskets. When they realized that there seemed to be an affinity among the objects they purchased, it dawned on them that they had become *collectors*.

Now this is serious business. When one acknowledges that he or she is a collector it is necessary to learn more about the kind of object that is collected, and to buy books and subscribe to magazines written for collectors. For some collectors, such as a friend who collects only teapots, a huge antique show is as much a lure as a contemporary craft gallery. It is the type of object—not the specific material or period—that interests him. For this collector, meeting and talking to antique dealers is as much fun as visiting potters in their studios. He enjoys seeing what each has that he might want to purchase. This is part of the social fun of collecting.

For other collectors there are clubs of like-

minded folks, and for every organized kinds of collectors—such as those of dolls or contemporary crafts—there are national and international organizations, with conferences and newsletters. Their meetings might feature speakers on advanced levels of connoisseurship pertaining to the favored collectible, round-table discussions, cocktail parties and other social events to provide an informal exchange of information.

Serious collectors of contemporary crafts seem to be a fairly new phenomenon. People have collected antique crafts for years and some of them, like Henry Ford and Henry Francis duPont, established museums that resulted from their passion for early American crafts and other objects. Collectors of contemporary crafts can be as varied as those interested in antiques. In the field of ceramics alone, I know one collector who has only vessels and sculpture by Frans Wildenhain. He has hundreds of them in all shapes, sizes and glazes. Another has only bowls, bottles and tableware by American potters. Still another collects ceramic sculpture with human figures, usually with satirical imagery.

Just as individual collectors may look at crafts with a particular point of view, so do museums. Several museums may collect the same kind of object, but with quite different viewpoints. For example, Tiffany glass is often found in the decorative art collections of American art museums. But you can also find it in the design collection of the Museum of Modern Art, in the American Craft Museum collection exemplifying artistry in our nation's craft heritage, and in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in a gallery on the history and technology of glass.

Museum curators may be valuable allies to collectors because it is their responsibility to keep

current in fields where they collect. However, it is also true that museum curators often have such broad responsibilities that they cannot keep up with everything, and must concentrate on a particular area. Collectors with a special devotion to a single medium or style of work may eclipse museum curators with their knowledge and connoisseurship; such individuals often are more diligent than museums in developing reference libraries of books, magazines and exhibitions catalogues. You may find that museums will be interested in a collection you have assembled with the educated taste this book may help you to develop. Just look at the museums bearing their founders' names—Freer, Walters and Terra, among others—and you will see where a collecting passion led. Other museums boast collections on a single subject or type of work given to them by dedicated collectors. The Goodman collection of American art pottery given to the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York; Joan Mannheimer's contemporary ceramic collection, a gift to the University of Iowa Museum of Art; and the Sperry collection of ceramics by Gertrud and Otto Natzler in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art come immediately to mind. Still other collectors enrich museums with single important objects, identifying themselves forever as discerning collectors who chose to share their love of art with others.

Don't ever think that you cannot develop the ability to select, and buy, art that a museum will want for its collection. In years of visiting private collections and looking at objects for exhibitions, I have seen many large collections. But I have also been taken by an artist to see a collector having only a single superb example of the artist's work—one so important it had to be included in a retrospective exhibition. Few collectors can

afford, as Joseph Hirshhorn and Patrick Lannan did, to buy an artist's entire show and select favorite pieces later. But anyone with the interest and patience to look, think and evaluate before buying a single object can make a significant purchase.

It amazes me that only a few years ago prints, then photographs, were recognized as significant art to be collected. Then the prices escalated. Generally speaking, objects in the crafts media—basically clay, glass, fiber, metal and wood—remain undervalued. I believe that will change, too.

Can craft be art? Of course! Anything that humans produce with skill and creative ingenuity can be art, whether a building, a table or a spoon. Objects that are made for use are often categorized as "decorative art" by museums, but that doesn't denigrate the quality of the designer-maker's artistry. In fact, I personally believe that a beautiful and original object that fulfills functional requirements deserves admiration beyond that given to an object that only has to *look* wonderful.

Much of what American craftspeople are designing and making today compares favorably with the best historical examples. They are producing the heirlooms of tomorrow—refined or stunningly original in design, and meticulously made. And, unlike much of the best painting, drawing and printmaking, these craft objects are still affordable to beginning collectors. I hope that after reading this book you will look anew at American crafts (if you're not already collecting in this field), and enjoy the pleasure of owning a piece of today. Remember, Chippendale chairs were once modern, too.

Lloyd E. Herman

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Writing this book has introduced me to the worlds of artists, collectors, museum and gallery professionals and some of the critics and scholars who keep track of and interpret the activities of all the others. I met invariable kindness in each of these worlds and acknowledge with pleasure that many individuals along the way helped make this book better than it would otherwise have been.

Every writer should be lucky enough to have an editor like Laura Tringali. Her suggestions unfailingly improved the manuscript and her contributions substantially increased lucidity. I will always remember with great pleasure her editorial care and personal qualities of humor and enthusiasm.

Nothing seemed to be impossible for Madge Baird, editorial director at Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., a publishing house whose actions speak louder than words for the fact that they care deeply about books. I also thank Frank J. Cook, director of publicity, for his cooperative guidance and interest in having this book reach a wide audience.

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Many individuals have a place in my heart and memory for the help they gave me, but for a work which took more than four years to prepare, it would be impossible to mention all by name. Apologizing in advance for undoubtedly leaving out some names, I would like to mention a few of those who helped me.

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I acknowledge gratefully the galleries and artists who provided photographs. Readers who wish to know more about these artists should contact the gallery listed. If there is no gallery, consult the resources section in chapter 3 for leads.

Every effort has been made to identify and credit photographers for the photos they took. If there have been inadvertent omissions, they will be corrected in future editions upon notification.

Robert Eberndorf's bead invites the viewer to touch and caress it. *Silver Bead*, 1985, 2 inches in diameter. (Photo by Bob Hansson.)



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INTRODUCTION

I first became aware of crafts as a special category of products one sunny day in June in the mid 1970s. In the course of my duties as a reporter, I attended the annual craft fair in Rhinebeck, N.Y., sponsored by the American Craft Council. I had visited the Dutchess County Fair Grounds in the past to attend annual county fairs each August. But this time, instead of prize bulls, sheep, chickens and 4-H exhibits, the rustic barns and livestock pens held some of the liveliest and most wonderful objects for display, living and personal adornment that I had ever seen. Furthermore, these fascinating items cost no more than the mass-produced variety normally found in stores—some even cost less.

As I walked around the sprawling grounds and talked to craftsmen and their customers, I was struck by the unusually joyous atmosphere. It seemed enough for many exhibitors that viewers appreciated and understood their work, while those who were buying acted as if they were receiving a gift, instead of parting with hard-earned money.

I went back to my office imbued with the desire to tell everybody about this wonderful new world I had discovered where creativity and car-

ing were part of every single object for sale. At the time, of course, it didn't occur to me that I had just come face to face with an extraordinary cultural phenomenon—the American Studio Craft movement—or that eventually I would devote four years of my life to writing about it.

After that first craft fair, I attended many others and visited the growing number of shops and galleries specializing in studio crafts. When I began this book I had a great deal of enthusiasm, but little knowledge of the shape of the contemporary craft movement. My idea was to describe the many kinds of crafts available, to give some guidelines about buying, using and enjoying them and to tell the story of the development of contemporary craft.

As is so often the case, fools rush in where angels (and experienced travelers) fear to tread. Eventually I learned that my simple goal was akin to sitting on top of one mountain and deciding to take a stroll over to the neighboring peak. It turned out to be a much longer and more complicated trip than I had anticipated.

The biggest challenge was finding information. As you will read, handicraft has been an important part of our culture, but it has been so taken for granted that nobody has written much

Tom Loeser's trays transform with imagination and color the conventional idea of a tray. *3 Trays*, 1987. Painted ash and walnut, largest 28 inches. (Photo by Andrew Dean Powell.)



about it. The story of the development of crafts is buried in primary sources such as defunct publications and first-person accounts. Some information is found in books that are really about something else. The rich material from the 1930s to the 1960s exists mainly in the memories of the participants, who proved to be among my best sources. In retrospect, finding and interviewing these people were among the most exhilarating parts of the research.

As I read and talked to collectors and craftsmen, I found a more interesting story than the one I originally set out to tell. I saw that divisions were occurring. Some craftsmen are channeling

their energies into producing multiples, either as small manufacturers or by designing for others, while other practitioners have set their sights on an artist's life, pursuing their muse wherever it takes them. Those who buy crafts also have a variety of motives, which can range from selecting a distinctive, good-quality functional item like a teapot or chair, to choosing a work of art that will have heirloom status.

I soon discovered that the differing goals of craftsmen have created a dialogue (which sometimes sounds like an argument) among various factions, as each strives to express its point of view. The word craft has many different possi-



Displaying and using Karen Karnes' subtly colored covered vessel would enrich a collector's daily life. *Stoneware Vessel*, 1982. Wood-fired stoneware, 13 × 14 inches. (Photo by Joshua Schreier.)

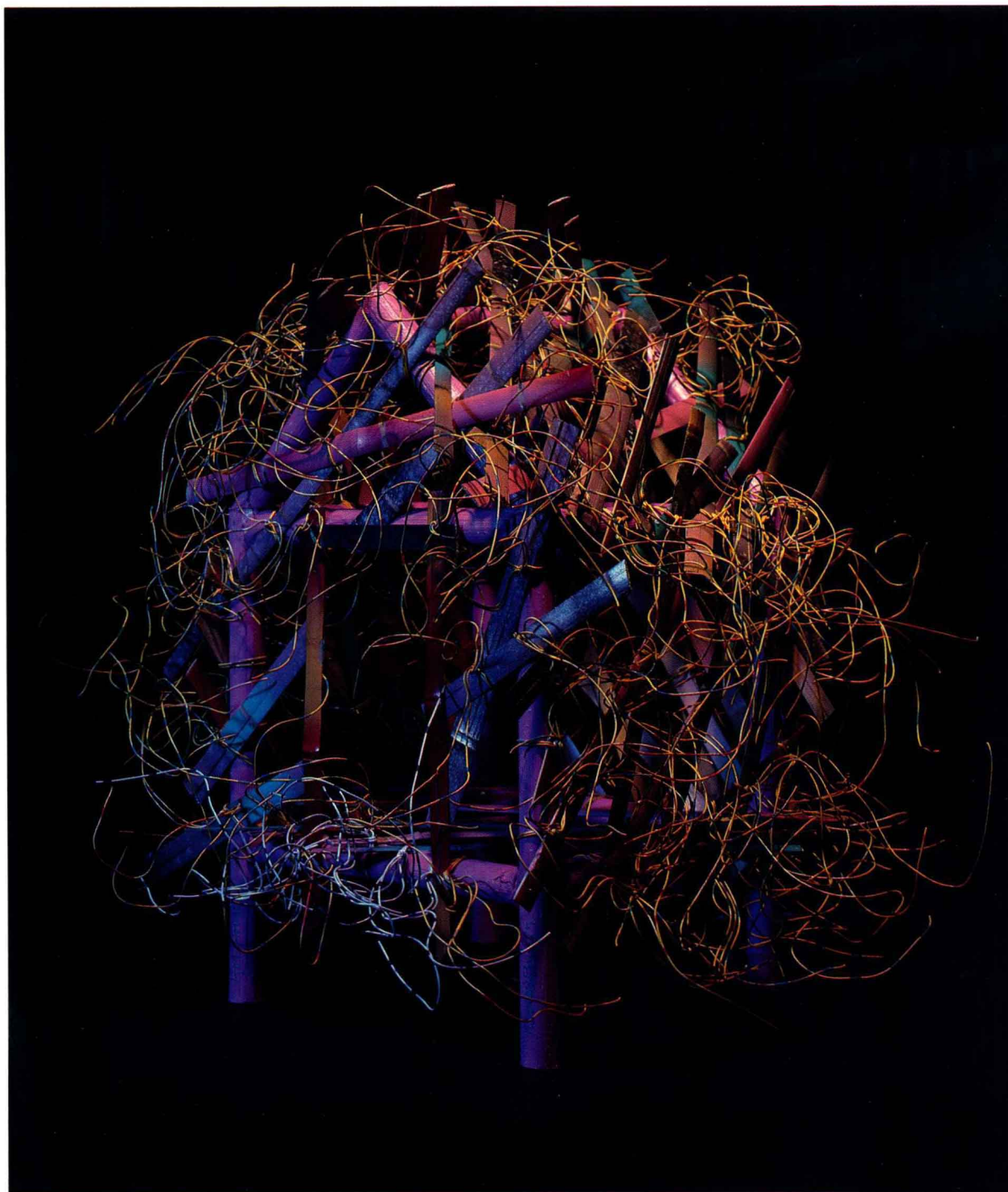
ble interpretations, and whenever I said I was working on a book about American crafts, it was always necessary to add several sentences of clarification. Most people guessed I was writing about crafts as a hobby and would tell readers how to make things. Some thought of the folk crafts of the past. A number were a little surprised to learn that the craftsmen I would be writing about are individuals whose education and interests classify them as artists.

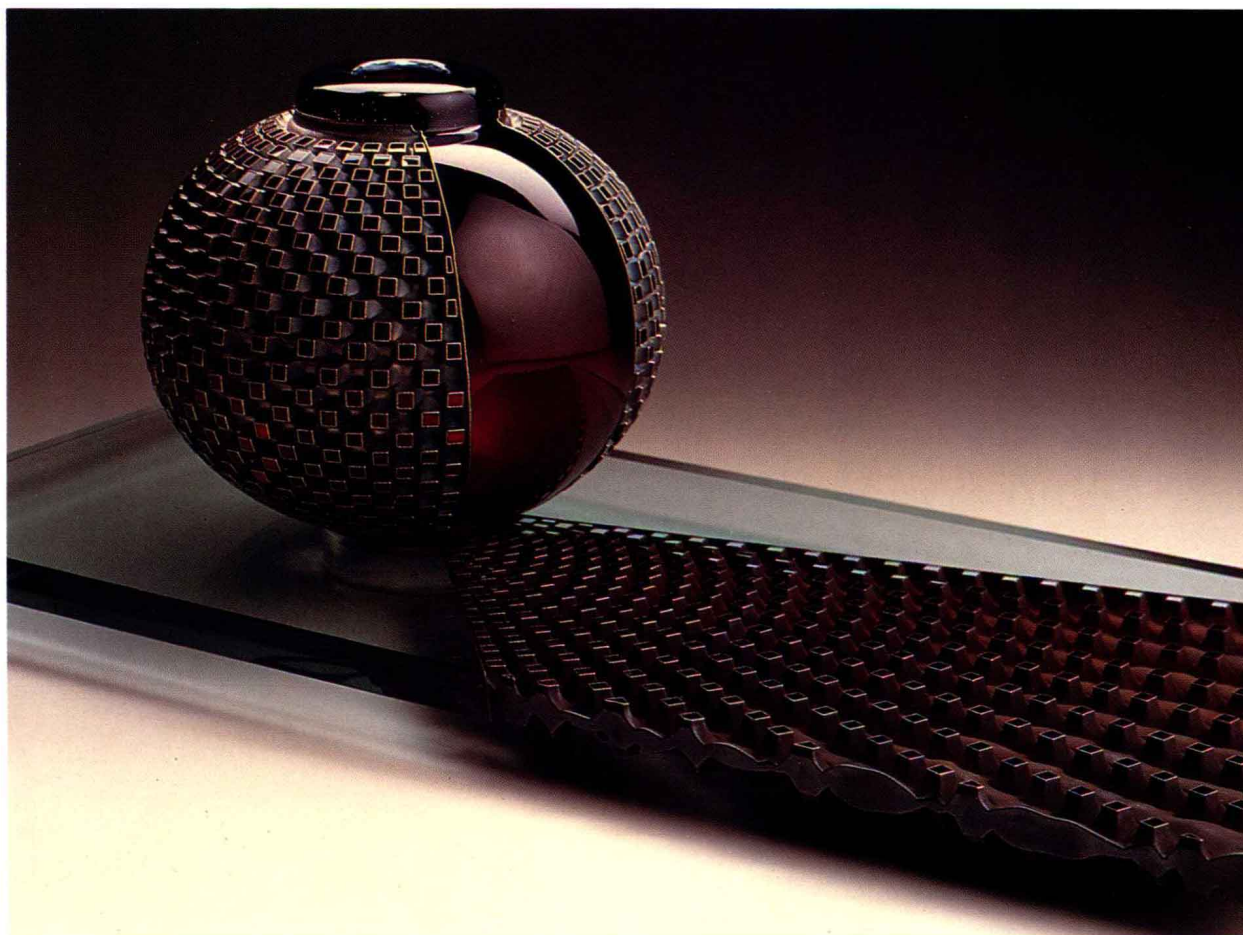
But is their work art? You have only to ask this question to cast an immediate pall on any group of craft enthusiasts. To treat crafts as art requires a willingness to go beyond traditional

narrow definitions of art and craft, but it is a leap well worth taking and one that is being validated by growing public acceptance. Many craft objects elicit an immediate intuitive response from viewers. They are powerful, moving and evocative and therefore embody the highest aesthetic achievements of fine art. Yet they retain the celebration of the object that is inherent in any craft work.

I have no wish to participate in intellectual slugging matches, exchanging definitions like punches. But I have noticed that the material of which it is made is often the subject of many art objects in craft media. The choice of materials

Nance O'Banion's mixed media work employs vibrant color and a tangle of wire to convey a personal vision of home. *Hot House*, 1987. Bamboo, paint and wire, 14 x 15 x 13 inches. (Photo by Jacques Cressaty, courtesy of The Allrich Gallery, San Francisco.)





In Michael Glancy's hands, the techniques of sandblasting and electroforming glass have produced an evocative art object. *Magna Eclipsed*, 1986, 8 inches tall. (Photo courtesy Heller Gallery, New York.)

and the way those materials are handled are as much a part of a piece's identity as the conceptual ideas it contains. As well as being an end in itself, the mastery of materials and processes provides contemporary craftsmen with a vocabulary for communicating their artistic vision. It seems to me that this synthesis of pure craft and fine art leads to craft art. This term is preferable as a description to the term decorative art, to which the ceramic, glass, fiber, wood and metal arts traditionally have been confined.

In 1946, which is the date usually advanced as the beginning of the contemporary American

Studio Craft movement, there was disdain in intellectual circles for interdisciplinary studies, American culture and the selection of craft media by artists. All appeared to be garments stitched together of fragments. Intellectually, the orthodox areas of study such as history, social science, literature and art were considered to be more worthwhile. Our polyglot culture appeared to be ill-placed to compete with that of ancient Europe. And craft media appeared to bear too close a relationship to domestic and industrial usefulness to contain artful statements.

Today, interdisciplinary studies and Ameri-



Though abstract, Ferne Jacobs' fiberwork invites the viewer to speculate on the nature of the human figure. *Red Figure Column*, 1986. Coiled, twined thread, 19 inches tall.

can cultural icons are so dominant that many say the pendulum has swung too far. American art, music, clothing, food, heroes, films and television are glorified all over the world. Craft art is approaching acceptance.

The lesson in this progression of attitudes is that values change. Objects are part of the value system of the culture in which they were created, but they also stand outside it if they survive. They are almost certain to have a different meaning to future societies. As the arts are handed down, we reassess their value for our own time. Since objects have a survival value, collecting them has merit even beyond the immediate pleasure they offer. Crafts collectors are participating in the richness of contemporary life, but they are also preserving art that might otherwise be lost for future consideration.

If craft art collecting seems different from collecting painting and sculpture, it is not surprising. Unlike these arts whose best examples are usually found at high prices primarily in New York and a few other large cities, craft art is not necessarily a big-city phenomenon. Academia and art institutions outside the major urban areas have provided the most hospitable setting for the pursuit of craft art. As a result, both craft artists and the galleries and museums where the best work can be seen are dispersed. Collectors may travel across the country in search of objects of merit.

Craft art has heretofore not been so noisy as other art forms. But the depth of its roots and the breadth of interest in making and looking at it have created a strong plant that has flourished regardless of critical attention, or lack of it. In the meantime, collectors are providing their money, time and energy to preserve and care for the art in their keeping. Through their commit-



Peter Vandenberg's ceramic sculpture is profoundly humanistic. *The Bird Watcher*, 1981. Stoneware, $35 \times 17\frac{1}{2} \times 15\frac{1}{2}$ inches. (Photo by Malcolm Varon, collection of Daniel Jacobs.)