

organization and I had youth and the energy to make use of the opportunities, like this major project, that came along. I look back at **OBJECTS: USA** as the first stage in my career. Not only did it help me personally, but it also helped develop the museum's collection through the major pieces added at the end of the tour.

**Pepich:** This exhibition, and its successful rollout, seems to be very much a product of a specific time and set of circumstances. Can you talk about the environment at that time and how **OBJECTS: USA** was presented to the public?

**Smith:** What is really important to understand is that it was the perfect time for an exhibition like this to take place. However, it was a time that was very different from today. There were few craft fairs or marketplaces, no internet with which to promote and present works, and little collecting to speak of. This activity, at that time, was truly underground. Artists working in the abstract expressionist style or pop artists were receiving major attention in both the art press and in national media; on the other hand, art in the craft media had very limited exposure.

**OBJECTS: USA's** American tour was important to craft's development here and its travel to Europe was significant there, as well. As an example, 53,000 people attended the exhibition in Edinburgh, Scotland and 35,000 people viewed the show in Warsaw, Poland. Many of the good craft teachers working in the US came from Europe. After **OBJECTS: USA**, these new Americans had exhibitions in Europe of works they produced in the US, and this helped make the international craft develop in the 1980s and 1990s.

**OBJECTS: USA** was very American on many levels. SC Johnson was involved in the early stages of corporate support of the arts in the US. A vast explosion of new activity was taking place in America's private art schools, colleges, and universities. New global connections were being formed in craft through the emergence of international craft organizations, the involvement of young people in the newly formed Peace Corps, and the studies American artists undertook abroad at European craft centers—all of which opened the artists up to a wide range of outside influences. Teachers and students were investigating and sharing new ideas and techniques—as when **Stanley Lechtzin** introduced electroforming to his students and **Harvey Littleton** taught glassblowing in the university setting. All of this activity—corporate sponsorship, university teaching, and openness to studying techniques and working with artists from outside the US—came together at the same time. There was a very American aspect about all of this that reflected something about our culture and the way we saw ourselves at the time and how we worked together, sharing ideas.

#### **Bruce W. Pepich**

Executive Director and Curator of Collections  
Racine Art Museum

This interview was conducted on August 20, 2019 and published on the occasion of RAM's exhibition *OBJECTS REDUX: 50 Years After OBJECTS: USA Defined American Craft*, on view at RAM, Racine, WI, from September 21, 2019 through January 5, 2020 and HCCC's exhibition, *OBJECTS: REDUX – How 50 Years Made Craft Contemporary*, on view at HCCC, Houston, TX, from September 28, 2019 through January 5, 2020.

**Racine Art Museum**  
441 Main Street  
Racine, Wisconsin 53403  
262.638.8300  
[ramart.org](http://ramart.org)

**Houston Center for Contemporary Craft**  
4848 Main Street  
Houston, Texas 77002  
713.528.4848  
[crafthouston.org](http://crafthouston.org)

© 2019 All rights reserved.

**R | A | M** Racine Art Museum

 **HOUSTON CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY CRAFT**

## OBJECTS REDUX

**A Conversation with Paul J. Smith, Co-Curator of *OBJECTS: USA***  
by Bruce W. Pepich

In October 1969, **OBJECTS: USA** opened at the then Smithsonian National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, DC, launching a new chapter in contemporary craft. With over 300 objects on display, a marketing campaign meant to generate interest across the American public, and sponsorship by a significant American company, SC Johnson, the project was designed to make an impact.

**Paul J. Smith** worked for the American Craftsmen's Council (ACC) (now the American Craft Council) from 1957 until 1987. He was Director of the ACC's museum in New York City from 1963 until 1987. At the end of his tenure, he was named Director Emeritus of the American Craft Museum, which today is known as the Museum of Arts and Design. Smith is in the unique position of being able to both address first-hand the organization of **OBJECTS: USA** and also reflect upon its influence on the field 50 years later. With a ringside seat to the heart of the contemporary craft field since the 1950s, he has a distinctive perspective on its history.

**Bruce W. Pepich:** In thinking back to 1969, can you talk first about your working method in organizing **OBJECTS: USA** with **Lee Nordness**? How did you and Lee choose artists? Who made the initial contacts?

**Paul J. Smith:** I would like to start by saying that having been involved in the creation of **OBJECTS: USA** 50 years ago, it is interesting to think back to a time when the show was not something historic but an exhibit we were creating. I give credit to Lee Nordness for this project—he was the one who realized the concept and developed it. Lee ran an eponymous commercial art gallery in New York that he opened in 1958.

It is also important to note that without the support of SC Johnson, which provided funding to purchase all the work and funded all research, travel, outreach, and marketing, **OBJECTS: USA** would never have happened.

When Lee invited me to become involved in assembling a craft collection that would become a traveling exhibition, I accepted, as I saw it as very exciting, important, and timely. His concept for this show was patterned after **ART: USA: NOW**, a major collection of contemporary paintings that was sponsored by SC Johnson in 1962. For this new exhibition, he knew he needed the resources of the ACC and its contacts with craft artists. It was a very informal arrangement. I had no title and the project was not clearly defined. Lee offered to cover my expenses and made a small financial contribution to the ACC. In addition, I was offered the chance to make the first-choice selection of one-third of the works from the exhibition for the Craft Museum's permanent collection. As this offer was a great opportunity to build the museum's collection I thought it also was a good time for the museum to be associated with a nationally significant project. My involvement in developing the **OBJECTS: USA** collection was extensive but focused in the curatorial area—the research and identification of artists and the selection of pieces. I was more of a guest curator or advisor. The vast amount of organizational details were handled by Lee and his staff.

**Pepich:** What was the curatorial point of view you and Lee sought to express in the show? Were you and Lee both being purposefully diverse or just broadly reflective?

**Smith:** When we started the research process, we used the ACC's files on artists which was an important resource. We assembled names of known artists to be considered. Then Lee would reach out to them, requesting slides and photographs. This was an ambitious and fast-moving phase—a marathon of collecting all the information we could because the time for organization was rather short. Remember, there was no internet; there were few galleries

and no art fairs such as SOFA [Sculpture Objects Functional Art and Design Fair] where you could see large amounts of work in one place. There were national competitions in craft at some museums, such as the Ceramic Nationals and the ACC Young Americans competitions. There were a few craft fairs and areas of the US where there were a density of activity.

The most important part of our process was the national travel for research. We would visit craft organizations and schools to meet with several people. We traveled extensively—an early press announcement mentioned an estimated 14,000 miles to all regions of the country. Lee made several trips solo since I still had a museum to run, but I tried to go frequently and conduct research in advance of our trip. Schools and university art departments were very important sources. We would meet with faculty members who were themselves candidates but they would also introduce us to recent graduates and other talent in the area. We would visit studios and have direct contact beyond the initial exchange of photographs. We undertook this process like professional curators would handle any major art exhibition, conducting in-depth research to create a body of work for the show.

I think that **ART: USA: NOW** was a national survey that laid the groundwork for Lee to conceptualize **OBJECTS: USA**—a similar way to portray the breadth of what was taking place in a field. We did not have a rigid philosophy in the beginning. Lee and I had no real disagreements—our choices of artists and specific works evolved. I saw this as an opportunity to show the spectrum of activity in each medium. We didn't verbalize it, but it was in our minds all along to be as broad as possible in illustrating the diverse threads of creativity we saw and giving exposure to works that had limited visibility compared to painting and sculpture. Much of this was very new and very American.

**Pepich:** What was the role of SC Johnson, as the funder of the exhibition, in the process of selecting the objects it would acquire?

**Smith:** Lee had direct contact with SC Johnson, but from what I can conclude they were very professional in their sponsorship. They provided funding and support, but wanted no imprint on the collection's content. **ART: USA: NOW** established a working method between Lee, his staff, and the people at SC Johnson and **OBJECTS: USA** followed this model. In addition to their generous financial support, SC Johnson provided the resources of their associates and, especially their public relations firm, **Carl Byoir & Associates**, which worked to promote the show throughout both the US and European tours. SC Johnson also sponsored the creation of the film, *With These Hands*, which featured some of the makers in **OBJECTS: USA**. They purchased one hour during prime time on ABC, which reached millions of people across the country with a single broadcast.

The exhibition opened on October 2, 1969, at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. The week it opened, a report on NBC's *Today* show gave it national press coverage. In 1972, when the works donated to the Craft Museum were debuted in New York, we were invited to bring works to the *Today* show and **Barbara Walters** interviewed me. This, again, reached millions. The generous support of SC Johnson was central to the travel and visibility of the exhibition and the field it covered. You can produce the greatest show in the world, but if you don't promote it, no one will know. This level of marketing was beyond what most museums themselves could have conducted and one of the main reasons **OBJECTS: USA** had such a great impact on public awareness.

**Pepich:** The selected artists were an invigorating mix of recognized figures and emerging talent, and many became major figures in their respective fields. Did you see substantial differentiations in the career accomplishments of the exhibitors? Did the recognition provided by **OBJECTS: USA** pave the way for their career success or do you think the exhibition captured career advancement that was already taking place?

**Smith:** I can't respond to individual achievements as much as to the collective message the show portrayed. **OBJECTS: USA** elevated this entire area of the visual arts that was gradually surfacing after World War II. It grew in the 1950s and became a dominant force in the 1960s. In planning the national tour, Lee specifically contacted art museums—where this type of work was not regularly shown. **OBJECTS: USA** reached audiences in each venue that did not know about contemporary craft beforehand. Every artist represented benefited from the vast exposure of the national and international tours. I, myself, included many of these artists in future shows at the Craft Museum.

The survey aspect of **OBJECTS: USA** meant we were bringing work in from different sources and wider viewpoints. We included **Anni Albers** who was 72, **Wharton Esherick** who was in his 80s, but also **Richard Marquis** who was 24. Of course, while we wanted a wide spectrum of accomplished and emerging artists, not every deserving talent could be represented. We balanced this by seeking a range within each medium, as in ceramics, where we had the functional work of **Bill Saxe** and the expressionist sculpture of **Peter Voulkos**. Ceramics had the largest number of artists because it was the largest field with the longest historic roots. Plastic as an art medium had far less time to develop and this is demonstrated by the number of pieces selected. Jewelry was well-represented but art to wear and contemporary quilting did not much exist at that time but there were a few areas that became large movements later. For example, **Marian Clayden** was represented by a tie-dyed garment which was the only piece of art to wear in the exhibition. **Ed Rossbach's** basket is the only fiber vessel in the show. By the 1980s and 1990s, both of these areas had become large sectors in the textile field.

**Pepich:** From the standpoint of organization, what led you to group the artists by media—over say region—since the project represented artists from across the country?

**Smith:** The US is a large geographical area. We wanted to look at the broadest view of the country. We didn't want a majority of the exhibitors to be from one state or area. We also wanted to represent traditional work that was contemporary, such as Native American. There was no quota to include each state or to have specific numbers of artists from certain areas. We sought work that covered different regions and provided the broadest view of the field from every angle. It was more important to us overall to focus on specific media than on where the work was being made.

The photographs of the opening exhibition demonstrate that the works were not generally installed segregated by medium but, instead, were blended together. Each museum venue on the tour was allowed to design its own installation and although I did not see all of them, I believe many museums intermingled the works.

The book was grouped by medium. Different strategies were employed for printed materials. For example, the small brochure that was handed out for free to visitors was organized in alphabetical order by artist.

**Pepich:** Can you talk about this project and the conversation of craft as art in the context of its time?

**Smith:** This topic is complicated intellectually as we know the whole terminology issue has had, and continues to have, many viewpoints. The entire nature of the creative process incorporates change. Having been asked many times about the difference of word identification in the arts, my answer is you have to be open to traditional terms in a new context or create new descriptive vocabulary.

Craft media have histories as old as civilization. I recently re-read Lee's essay in the book and it points out that he had an awareness of this area of the arts along with broad interests in a wide range of artistic media. He had a bias in that he believed that craft belonged in art museums and that is why he chose those venues for the show's tour.

I think the timing of **OBJECTS: USA** was really significant and I think that is why it has historical interest now, which will increase. It was a broad report of work produced in the 1960s—an important reference and documentation made in a significant decade. That era was moved by young people, communal living, and the arts—many new ideas were generated, and so much happened. Anything was possible—it was very American and focused on sharing. As Studio Craft was a part of the enormous explosion in creativity that took place, it was the perfect time for **OBJECTS: USA**, and I think the show will continue to resonate in the future.

**Pepich:** From the standpoint of your personal development, could you situate this project in your own career? Did you learn anything that specifically impacted how you selected artists or organized shows subsequently at the Craft Museum?

**Smith:** I was trained as an artist, not as an art historian. My creative education was an important ingredient for the programming I produced. I always had an appetite for learning and I learned on the job. A few years after arriving at the ACC, I was named Director of the museum. In that position, I would accept as many jurying requests as possible so I could learn. **OBJECTS: USA** was an opportunity to be involved in a very big project. I was in a privileged position in a national