



## OBJECTS REDUX

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## **OBJECTS REDUX**

**50 Years After OBJECTS: USA Defined American Craft  
at Racine Art Museum**

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.

**OBJECTS: USA**, really the presentation of a collection assembled for SC Johnson by art dealer **Lee Nordness** and then Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now known as Museum of Arts and Design) director **Paul Smith**, showcased “the American object maker.” In the late 1960s, as society was undergoing social upheaval, studio craft in the United States was pushing boundaries in terms of influences, subjects, scale and scope, intent, and material exploration. On some level, studio craft shifts matched societal shifts and the handmade object and its maker marked a tactility, passion, and intimacy that stood in response to mass-production, machines, and disposability. The issues and concerns that were impacting artist’s daily lives were influencing the work they produced and the context in which it would be shown.

Accompanied by a substantial book with images and artist biographies and an hour-long movie—as well as a sales catalogue entitled *arts/objects: usa—OBJECTS: USA*, a collection of more than 300 works made of so-called craft materials, traveled to over 20 US and 14 international venues on a multi-year tour. Before being disassembled in the way of gifts to several institutions, the collection introduced a broader public to the possibilities of media most often associated with function not intellectual, aesthetic, or material investigations and offered a new way for understanding those works and their makers.

**OBJECTS REDUX: 50 Years After OBJECTS: USA Defined American Craft** at Racine Art Museum (RAM) investigates the legacy of this powerhouse project. While it could be argued that other things certainly helped to outline craft within the field, the entirety of the **OBJECTS: USA** project helped to articulate what craft could mean to those not yet versed in the conversation. **OBJECTS REDUX** blends work from the original exhibition with works by many of the same artists produced as part of the accompanying selling program,



**arts/objects: usa.** This is a juxtaposition that underscores the complicated dynamic between craft's history as functional and multiple works as well as its shift to also include content-driven singular objects. In addition, at its core, the exhibition marks a historical moment that involved artists and issues still relevant today.

Addressing the legacy of **OBJECTS: USA** means acknowledging both praise and criticism while attempting to understand how these were shaped by the culture at large. A wide range of artists had their work selected for inclusion. In the wake of burgeoning conversations regarding plurality and multi-culturalism, there were a sizeable number of women and diverse backgrounds represented. While most of the artists did come from European traditions of making, this was not a rigid benchmark and experimentation was reflected. Installation photos from the opening at the Smithsonian reveal what visitors might have seen in the galleries. Energetic, yet nuanced, exchanges across object types featured large pieces of furniture displayed in front of work hanging from the wall and ceiling, as well as pedestals holding work in close proximity. Such choices showcased both materials and ideas in unexpected ways. For example, one vignette featured a table/chair/stool by **Wendell Castle** and a **Toshiko Takaezu** rug arranged in front of a **John Mason** wall relief, **Ronald Hayes Pearson** candelabra, woven hanging work by **Allen and Dorothy Fannin**, and a large ceramic vessel by **Claude Conover**.

Institutions reported record-breaking attendance and positive newspaper reviews emphasized the quality, tone, and sophistication of the work, as well as its capacity to shed new light on craft. If the public response was highly favorable on the whole, some makers were conflicted about what the show represented. Featured **OBJECTS: USA** artist **Ed Rossbach**, in a review for *Craft Horizons*, identified the works in the show as already "irrelevant," highlighting how quickly thoughts about what was being made—and how—were shifting. He also suggested that in turning the conversation more to objects of contemplation and away from craft or skill, critical dimensions were being lost. Of course, an expansive project of this nature would not necessarily have served all potential audiences similarly.

Regardless of its shortcomings, it is hard to deny that **OBJECTS: USA** became a reference point for contemporary studio craft because it summarized what had been going on in the field—where intellectual and artistic inquiry were taking hold as paths of exploration alongside of—or instead of—function. For the general public, the concepts associated

with the entire project offered a dynamic and shifting framework for understanding familiar materials and types of objects, as well as the makers associated with them.



(far left)  
**Peter Voulkos**  
*Platter from the Circular Variations Series*, ca. 1970  
 Glazed stoneware and porcelain, edition of 200  
 Racine Art Museum, Promised Gift of Johnson Bank  
 Trustee of the QTIP Trust for Bill Boyd u/a Karen Johnson Boyd

(left)  
**Art Smith**  
*Purity Ring*, ca. 1975  
 14k-gold and rose quartz, edition of 200  
 Racine Art Museum,  
 Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd



**Walter Nottingham**  
*Basket Shrine II*, ca. 1970  
 Hand-dyed jute and sisal, feathers, satin,  
 velvet, beads, bone, raffia, and thread  
 Racine Art Museum,  
 Promised Gift of Johnson Bank  
 Trustee of the QTIP Trust for Bill Boyd  
 u/a Karen Johnson Boyd



As **Lee Nordness** makes clear in an accompanying brochure, an overarching construct of **OBJECTS: USA** was to “expose through a tour of exhibitions the objects being created today by artists in materials which have traditionally been called ‘craft media,’ such as clay, glass, fiber, wood.” There were many underlying concerns and threads to follow in the web of objects, text, media, and marketing. One example is an emphasis on the idea that most of these artists were steadily producing work but not being shown or supported in museums or galleries.

While they were given support by SC Johnson through the project itself—by being featured in public relations and collateral materials and having work purchased for the touring collection that would then be distributed across various institutions—some of the artists were

also involved in the sales-oriented program, *arts/objects: usa*. This part of the project is not as well-documented or tracked as the collection-gathering or gallery-focused exhibition. Nordness identified it as a means to share “the excitement of hand-made objects, all in limited editions, all created by leading artist-craftsmen in the U.S.” Participating artists included **Wendell Castle, Arline Fisch, Harvey Littleton, Art Smith, Jean Stamsta, Peter Voulkos, and Dorian Zachai**. In addition, works by artists not featured in the collection/exhibition were sometimes offered, including candlesticks by **Albert Paley** and a hand-painted box by **John Wilde**.<sup>1</sup>

**OBJECTS REDUX**—and the larger exhibition series of studio craft from 1960 to 1985 that it anchors at RAM—showcases the type of work that raised big questions about what was being created 30 to 50 years ago, by whom and for whom.

While the show punctuates an era that has seen craft’s presence rise in fine art museums and encouraged a larger conversation about what the word “craft” could mean, it also reminds us that these discussions are not linear paths, but rather interconnected threads.

**Lena Vigna**, Curator of Exhibitions  
 Racine Art Museum



(above left)  
**Marvin Lipofsky and Gianni Toso**  
*Venini Series 1972 #3, 1972*  
 Glass, edition of 25  
 Racine Art Museum,  
 Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd

(right)  
**Arline Fisch**  
*With It (Neckpiece), ca. 1970*  
 18k-gold, edition of 200  
 Racine Art Museum,  
 Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd

## **OBJECTS: REDUX**

### **How 50 Years Made Craft Contemporary at Houston Center for Contemporary Craft**

The year 1969 holds a particular place in our collective memory, serving as a liminal boundary in our imagination that separates contemporary culture from all that came before. It was the year of the moon landing by Apollo 11, the Woodstock music festival, and the first draft lottery for the Vietnam War. The Occupation of Alcatraz by Indians of All Tribes (IOAT) began, and the police raid of the Stonewall Inn resulted in the uprising that precipitated the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement. *Sesame Street* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* premiered on television, the UNIX computer operating system was invented, and the first message was sent over the precursor to the internet, ARPANET.

Tucked neatly into 1969 was the opening of the seminal exhibition, **OBJECTS: USA**, organized by New York art dealer **Lee Nordness** and first exhibited at the now Smithsonian American Art Museum before touring the nation. The exhibition was perhaps the most comprehensive presentation of the American Studio Craft movement that had ever been attempted, featuring more than 300 works by over 250 studio craftspeople. It compiled a snapshot of nearly three decades of progress and evolution, stitching together a survey for a public that had previously had few opportunities to observe the development of the field. The show included the nascent disciplines of studio glass and plastics, along with the traditional disciplines of fiber, ceramics, and jewelry, that led early innovation and drew upon deeper wells of historical influence and technical innovation.

Looking back at **OBJECTS: USA**, it is almost obscene to think that one would have the ability to pick which of those artists would dominate the conversation over the next 50 years. Time has already indicated who, among the 250 or so artists, would maintain or increase their share of influence and who would fade into obscurity. Like *Sesame Street* or *Stonewall*, what has endured is obvious, but, even then, the milieu of the original **OBJECTS: USA** was itself contested. In a 1972 issue of *Craft Horizons*, fiber artist **Ed Rossbach** reviewed the exhibition as it made its way to Oakland, CA. He saw the show as a funeral dirge to the craft that had come before. With prescience, Rossbach hypothesized a time when the physicality of the object, especially in a museum context, would no longer be assured.<sup>2</sup>



The historic survey recognized a group of artists for their ingenuity and skill related to object-making, adding credibility to craft as a discipline. In his catalogue essay, Nordness was perplexed by the semantics and hierarchies placed on craft and deferred to the artists to choose how to define themselves. Now, the field has moved beyond the introspective semantics of art, craft, and design to harness the transformative power of making to shape the world around it.

(above right)  
**Kay Sekimachi**  
*Ogawa II*, 1969  
Nylon monofilament, glass beads, and plastic tubing  
Courtesy of Forrest L. Merrill Collection  
Photography by M. Lee Fatherree

(left)  
**Matthew Szösz**  
*Untitled (Inflatable) No. 75g*, 2018  
Glass  
Courtesy of the Artist  
Photography by the Artist



When attempting to classify American craft in a global context, Nordness stated, “There is no identifiable American style in objects unless diversity is a style.”<sup>3</sup> In the current socio-political

moment, when diversity is threatened in America, this still rings true. Today’s makers own this defining characteristic. **OBJECTS: REDUX** at Houston Center for Contemporary Craft features a cross-section of contemporaries who foster community, spotlight socio-political barriers and challenge dominant cultural narratives, demonstrate the necessity of haptic skills in a digital age, and forge new methods of experimentation—building on a rich legacy of traditional practices in technique.

The selected artists do not shy away from engaging with complex issues. Revisionists in the field of ceramics,

like **Jennifer Ling Datchuk**, **Nicki Green**, and **Roberto Lugo**, use traditional practices and classical archetypes in their vessels to introduce the histories of marginalized communities into mainstream culture. Through the language of jewelry, **Holland Houdek** portrays medical implants as a luxury, calling attention to the limitations of the American healthcare system.

Fifty years after the advent of the internet, the digital age has evolved, fundamentally changing the ways in which people communicate and experience the world. Now, social media is an essential tool in an artist’s professional practice. Glass artist **Matthew Szös** captures mesmerizing videos of his nontraditional method of inflating sheet glass, utilizing technology to captivate a global audience. Furniture maker **Annie Evelyn** questions the role that furniture plays in today’s society by using her medium to engage with selfie culture.

Like their predecessors, many artists continue to push the boundaries of traditional craft practice by dabbling in new methods of experimentation and play. Using ingenuity and an aesthetic drive akin to that of **Wendell Castle**, furniture maker **Ross Hansen** plays with new materials, such as epoxy resin, which he pigments and combines with wood to create one-off pieces. **Christy Matson** creates hybrid tapestry paintings using an unspun, Japanese paper yarn that she paints and then weaves directly into her tapestries. By working on a computer-programmable Jacquard loom, she is able to conceptualize a rich complexity of color, texture, and pattern for her fiber work.

There is no doubt that what is thought of as contemporary today will mean something very different in the years to come. But the contemporary makers featured in **OBJECTS: REDUX** have already made sizeable contributions to the field, as they confront contemporary issues, encourage a broader understanding of craft, and drive the field’s relevance into the future.

**Kathryn Hall**, Curator  
and **Perry Price**, Executive Director  
Houston Center for Contemporary Craft



## Endnotes

1. Not surprisingly, work offered for sale was sometimes markedly different than what was in the collection—**Arline Fisch's** *With It* neckpiece (edition of 200, \$375) was much smaller in scale and considerably more wearable for most when compared to her 52 1/2 inch-long *Body Ornament*. **Wendell Castle** offered a music stand for sale (edition of 24, \$550) as compared to a mahogany and silver leaf desk. On the other hand, both **Art Smith** and **Walter Nottingham** created, respectively, jewelry (a gold and rose quartz ring, edition of 200, \$110) and hanging sculpture (hand-dyed jute and sisal, 86 inches high, unique, \$2,500), that echoed more closely what was featured in the gallery. These items were made available in full-color catalogues whose dissemination is hard to track. There appear to be at least two versions of the catalogue produced, with changes between them, but it is not clear if there were more. The works from **art/objects: usa** featured in this gallery at RAM were purchased through one of the catalogues and ultimately made their way to public and corporate collections.

While **OBJECTS: USA** has been identified as a milestone in contemporary craft, the success of **arts/objects: usa** is difficult to assess. Anecdotally, there is apparent confusion with the name being so close to the collection/exhibition name. For example, some owners of work that was sold through **arts/objects: usa** have thought they owned pieces from **OBJECTS: USA**. And, **Karen Johnson Boyd**—who was herself more and more invested in contemporary craft and associated with those involved—shared that just because an artist offered an edition of a certain number, they were not necessarily engaged to make all the pieces.

Despite this, it is interesting to see how this idea of offering handmade work to the public—independent of galleries or fairs—was taken up

in later years through sources such as **The Guild** ([theguild.com](http://theguild.com)) and, its current incarnation, **Artful Home** ([artfulhome.com](http://artfulhome.com)).

**Artful Home's** mission is wholeheartedly similar to the ideas promoted by **OBJECTS: USA** 50 years prior.

They state: *Art is our passion. We are dedicated to offering the most exceptional and beautiful works of fine art, craft, and design for your home and wardrobe. We are equally committed to supporting the livelihoods of the celebrated artists and designers who create this work.*

2. Ed Rossbach, "Objects: USA Revisited," *Craft Horizons*, vol. 32, no. 4, (August 1972): 38-39.

3. Lee Nordness, introduction to *OBJECTS: USA: Works by Artist-Craftsmen in Ceramic, Enamel, Glass, Metal, Plastic, Mosaic, Wood, and Fiber*. Third printing, July 1972 (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1970), 11.



(above left)

**Holland Houdek**

*Asymmetrical Mammoplasty - Double Breast Implant* (Neckpiece) from the *Hyperbolic Series*, 2015  
Copper, silicone breast implants, and Swarovski® crystals  
Courtesy of the Artist  
Photography Courtesy of the Artist

(opposite left)

**Ross Hansen**

*Marbled Shelf*, 2017  
Epoxy resin, pigment, and wood  
Courtesy of Volume Gallery  
Photography Courtesy of Volume Gallery

(above right)

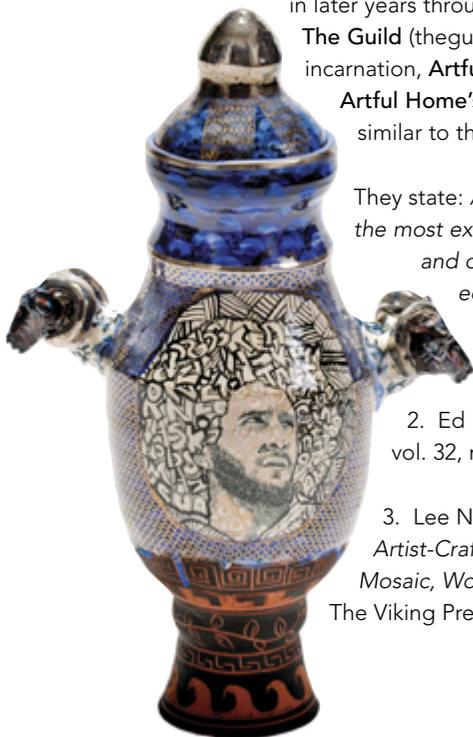
**Christy Matson**

*Optics*, 2018  
Acrylic on paper and cotton linen  
Courtesy of Volume Gallery  
Photography Courtesy of Volume Gallery

(left)

**Roberto Lugo**

*Colin and a Queen*, 2018  
Terracotta, china paint, and lustres  
Courtesy of Wexler Gallery  
Photography by KeneK Photography



Acknowledging the 50th anniversary of *OBJECTS: USA* and reflecting its importance, the Racine Art Museum (RAM) and the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft (HCCC) each organized concurrent exhibitions and collaborated on this gallery guide. 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.

Exhibition curated at RAM by Lena Vigna, Curator of Exhibitions

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(front cover)

**Wendell Castle**

*Desk* (Silver Leaf Desk), 1967

Mahogany, cherry, plywood, gesso, and silver leaf

Racine Art Museum, Gift of SC Johnson in Honor of the 50th Anniversary

of RAM's Wustum Museum

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago

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