



object

Of course, this is no ordinary exhibition of craft objects. It is an exhibition of contemporary American craft assembled by the nationally lauded US craft curator, Michael Munroe, for both the President of the United States and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. The White House Collection of American Crafts was created in 1993 at the behest of the Clintons to celebrate the National Year of American Craft, a dedicated year mandated by a joint resolution of Congress and Presidential Proclamation.

Both the exhibition and its virtual tour have been the subject of considerable debate among the museum mafia and members of the public since a combined Washington DC launch in April. Exhibition purists say the virtual tour does not and cannot work, but others argue that it is the wave of the future for museums and galleries. Many museums are now scrambling to put together their own virtual tours, and the National Museum of American Art (NMAA) certainly expects to create more now that it has a prototype.

One of the first things I considered when I sat down at the computer was whether a virtual exhibition could possibly match the experience of physically walking through the exhibition space. The answer, in the most literal terms, is of course 'no'. Not unexpectedly however, I found that the virtual tour offers a different kind of visitor experience. It provides insight through information and multiple images, making conceptual and technical links between the craft artists and their work. Additionally, the images in the program show the objects in the context of White House interiors, something missing from a visit to the white cubed gallery space.

The virtual tour begins with a welcome from both the Director of

The breakthrough was a simultaneous launch of both a touring exhibition and an Internet Virtual Tour.



the NMAA and Hillary Rodham Clinton. You can follow the Curator on a room by room examination of the objects, or you can browse at your leisure—honing in on particular media or artists. There are five media groups featured in the collection: fibre, ceramics, glass, metal and wood.

Virtual visitors can click on photographs of each of the seventy-two objects and access video, audio and textual information both on the object and the artist. The virtual tour provides biographical profiles of the artists, artists' statements, images and sometimes video footage of them at work in their studios. Studio visits take you behind the scenes as the artists demonstrate and discuss what tools they use, how they work with their materials and what distinguishes their approach to their craft. There is also a 'works in progress' section to the studio visit where the virtual visitor is invited to watch as new work is created, and repeat visitors will witness the evolution of an object.

As the tour progresses, the virtual visitor is provided a clearer sense of the curatorial process and particularly the clear limitations against which Munroe worked to create the collection. His was a challenge to locate works which would meld with the traditional architecture and historical decor of the White House while expressing the skill, imagination and vitality of American craft artists in the 1990s. Munroe describes how each piece was selected to complement a specific site within the building, with careful consideration given to the colour, texture and scale of the period rooms. A piece made of contrasting purple and black woods by Peter Petrochoko, for example, echoes linear patterning suggestive of the topography of a nearby map charted in 1775 by Peter Jefferson, father of Thomas Jefferson.

The collection playfully contests conservative perceptions of appropriate objects for formal settings. On first glance conservative taste appears to have won out with the classical lines of objects such as Dante Marioni's glass amphorae which fall in so harmoniously with the Louis 16th styling of the Yellow Oval room. Look again and you realize that there is nothing

conservative about their biting acid-yellow colour nor their scale. In another room Munroe takes the concept of a simple carved wooden bowl atop a 19th Century side table and replaces it with a striking white pine mosaic sphere by Philip Moulthrop.

An important aspect of the virtual tour is its interactive forum where questions can be put directly to the artists. If there is a particular artist whose work interests you, or you would like to pose questions about their motivations, techniques, training and so on, space is available for your curiosities to be recorded. An answer will arrive in due course if you simply keep checking the Internet over the next few days. In many cases, artists have also provided E-mail addresses for more immediate contact. Questions can be put to such heavyweights as glass artist Dale Chihuly or metal worker Albert Paley. The answers that fly back, however, may not shed much light. For example, a viewer asked 69 year-old woodworker Sam Maloof whether he could impart any 'tricks of the trade' to shorten the learning curve of woodworkers starting out. His lean response was digitally recorded as "there are no secrets... it was going to be difficult".

The Internet tour also makes conceptual cross-links between work in the collection. For example, if I were to look up the details on the woven and oxidized copper basket by Ken Carlson, other works in ceramic and wood are suggested to explore different approaches to the vessel form. Or you can move from one studio image to that of another artist to appreciate the different working environments of craft production. And there is a glossary of terms and techniques available for those who are not *au fait* with craft jargon.



The virtual visitor has yet another advantage over the gallery visitor. You, via the Internet, can catch a glimpse of everyday life in the White House and the foibles of its residents. As you enter each room, a short description of its history and use is provided. You learn that several First Ladies, including Ellen Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt and Roslyn Carter have taken an interest in promoting American craft. But none, it seems, have been as adventurous as the current incumbent. Apparently the Clintons have taken considerable delight in bringing these vibrant and contemporary works to the formal environs of the White House. The Front Hall, for example, has been traditionally decorated by previous First families with Victorian furniture and portraits of former Presidents. The Clintons have replaced these with a painting on loan from Willem de Kooning, the perfect foil for a whimsical, surrealist clock by metalsmith Wendell Castle.

A final cautionary note about this new dimension in museum access. As a recent phenomenon the concept of a virtual exhibition experience does have its faults. Audio and video files take an interminably long time (up to four minutes) to download onto the screen and run for less than sixty seconds once they are there. The images are excellent if you have access to a high resolution screen and a fast computer. When I dialled the exhibition on my home PC, images became far more graphic than photographic, and video and audio were not feasible. If you are looking at the program on a less powerful machine I suggest avoiding the audio/video. Instead, keep to the 'text only' version which provides good still images of each object together with a photograph of the artist as well as the biographical material, statements and the 'question and answer' forum.

Technical problems aside, this is unarguably the beginning of a new chapter in museum access. *How to get there:* The National Museum of American Art is on the World Wide Web (WWW) which can be accessed through a commercial on-line service or Internet service provider. Once logged onto an Internet browser such as Netscape, Mosaic or Lynx, type in the address: <http://www.nmaa.si.edu/WHC/AmericanCrafts>.

The exhibition began a US museum tour in September 1995 and the virtual tour remains on the Internet for an indefinite future.

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From The White House Collection of American Crafts 1995:

Above: Michael Sherrill Incandescent Bottles, Facing page: David J Levi Bird Jar, Below left: Dante Marioni Yellow Pair, Below: Wendell Castle Presence Clock.

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