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Crossing the Divide Between Art and Craft

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Crossing the Divide Between Art and Craft

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Throughout history, various qualities of art have gone in and out of fashion, works declared high art being considered most important. However, there has always been a hierarchy of not only subjects of art but also of media used to create art. Some media, such as fibers, stained glass, mosaics, and even ceramics, are considered on the lower end of this scale, due to their associations with certain processes and function. I argue that it is illegitimate to maintain a hierarchy based on processes and function, for all works of art require some knowledge and skill of one's craft, whether it is painting, sculpting, printmaking, photography, mosaics, ceramics, fibers or any other medium. The many debates over art and so-called craft date back as far as philosophers of Ancient Greece and show the apparent need to clearly define the two, to make everything distinctly fit either art or craft. There have been many artistic movements that have questioned this distinction. By exploring the debate around art and craft through the examination of the works of relevant philosophers, artists, and artistic periods I argue that this distinction needs to be refined, thus eliminating the negative connotation of "craft."

The need to define the difference between art and craft has become an arduous and ultimately unnecessary task. They are dependent on each other and the line between the two is under constant change within the artistic community. Artists are battling the stigma that craft is low art and high art is only achieved by artwork that falls within painting or sculpture.

Throughout history, various qualities of art have gone in and out of fashion, works declared high art being considered most important. There has always been a hierarchy of not only subject matter but also of media used to create art. Some media, such as fibers, are considered on the lower end of this scale, due to their associations with certain processes, function and media associated with the female gender.

Within this paper some important points surrounding this matter will be addressed by using the artist Gwendolyn Magee, as a case study, for her work falls within the realm of both art and craft. By exploring the debate around art and craft through the examination of Magee in relation to the works of relevant philosophers, artists, and artistic periods, I argue that this distinction needs to be refined, thus eliminating the negative connotation of "craft."

In my search for artists that work in the craft medium I discovered Gwendolyn Magee. She is an African American artist who creates artistic quilts that address the oppression of African Americans and in some cases serve as a memorial for those that suffered through injustices.

Her artworks have been featured in many galleries and exhibits all over the East coast, Southern states and overseas. The Mississippi Museum of Art and the Smithsonian National Gallery of American Art have quilts of hers in their permanent collection (fig. 1).¹ In the hopes of using her as an example in my paper I sent her an email asking if she would allow me to write

¹ Magee, Gwendolyn. "Exhibitions and Resume." Gwendolyn Magee: Textile Arts. <http://www.gwenmagee.com/resume.html> (accessed March 6, 2010).

about her. I asked her opinion of the current state of the art and craft debate and how she dealt with it in her artwork. She responded and not only answered my questions, but also led me to helpful articles.

Historically there have been many philosophers attempting to define art and craft. A contemporary philosopher, Stephen Davies defines art and craft similar to previous philosophers but in a way that is easily understood today. In his book The Philosophy of Art he wrote a concise and commonly accepted definition of craft. In summary, he claims that crafts serve a functional purpose and works of art, “are not mere means to ends but are ends in themselves.”² An important thing to note in Davies’s definition of art is that it must be “creative and original.” I believe that every form of art requires some craftsman skills, even what Davies refers to as the „creative arts.“ My argument is that if a material is associated with craft, but is used in an original and creative way, then it is an artwork and not merely a craft, thus going against the point that there is a clear distinction between craft and art. The works by artists like Gwendolyn Magee show how aggravating and irrelevant distinctions between art and craft have become. She uses a medium that according to conventional definitions has been deemed craft, but she also includes an emphasis on content, which is typically reserved for art, making Magee’s work original and creative.

As a result of the acceptance of the distinction of art and craft made by philosophers such as Davies, a hierarchy of materials and content has been created. High art, generally speaking, has come to be associated with painting and sculpture. Within painting there are certain requirements that dictate the qualities of the work that declare it as high art. The same can be applied to sculpture, which traditionally is thought to fall within the realm of high art if it is

² Stephen Davies. Philosophy of Art. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006), 5.

marble, bronze or wood. The importance of content is another element that brings a work into the art realm, for craft traditionally is thought to have content of minor significance or none at all.

Gwendolyn Magee crosses the divide between art and craft by working in a medium associated with craft, but depicting content that has a very significant impact. She writes, “It is the tradition of quilts like those that our „Big Mamas“ and „Aunt Effies“ so painstakingly made that is the essence of the medium through which I now visually represent their trials and tribulations and unfailing capacity for hope eternal.”³ Quilts have an association with the African American heritage that she depicts in the narrative of her work. In her piece titled, “God of Our Silent Tears part II,”⁴ (fig. 2) she literally depicts an image of a quilt within her artwork that presents itself in the form of a quilt. Magee is making socio-political statements with quilts such as “God of Our Silent Tears part I” (fig. 3). This work questions the equality of the justice system by depicting an execution scene addressing the disproportionate percentage of African-Americans given the death penalty. “God of Our Silent Tears part II” is an image of the death penalty from the point of view of the families that get left behind. By these deliberate connections between medium, content and her heritage, Magee raises her quilts to the status of fine art thus disrupting any lines of distinction. She is an important contemporary artist who is helping to move towards a more balanced canon than the one that has been historically dominated by white males.

High art has been challenged by a number of different movements, such as Dadaism, the Bauhaus, Pop art, and the “Pattern and Decoration Movement,” leading to a questioning of the distinctions between “high” and “low.” The Bauhaus was a school in Germany that existed from

³ Magee, Gwendolyn. "FAQ." Gwendolyn Magee: Textile Arts. <http://www.gwenmagee.com/faq.html> (accessed March 6, 2010).

⁴ Magee, Gwendolyn. "Portfolio: Narrative." Gwendolyn Magee: Textile Arts. <http://www.gwenmagee.com/narrative.html> (accessed March 31, 2010).

1919 to 1933 and had one of its proclaimed goals to get rid of the distinction between the fine arts and craft. But despite these goals women were strongly „encouraged“ to stay in the realm of „women“s work“ like weaving (fig. 4). Women were discouraged from workshops focusing on metal and wood and instead were encouraged to enroll in the Weaving Workshop.⁵ As a result, the Bauhaus actually reinforced the idea of „women“s work“ instead of overcoming it, even though it presented itself as an innovative institution. Fiber works have suffered greatly from the negative connotations of such terms as „craft“ and „women“s work.“

There have been groups such as the “Pattern and Decoration Movement” starting in the late 1970s that attempted to raise the status of fibers and other media such as tile-making, by creating works that blur the division between art and craft. Miriam Schapiro (fig. 5) and Joyce Kozloff (fig. 6) purposely employ references to mundane objects associated with women such as fans, kitchen tile and quilts. In a work by Kozloff, in the Minnesota State University, Mankato library, she makes reference to the craft of mosaics through the use of ceramic tiles. This work depicts eight cities that fall on the same horizontal parallel as Mankato. She repeats several abstract decorative motifs which is typical of the Pattern and Decoration Movement.

Similarly to the Pattern and Decoration Movement, Magee attempts to overcome the derogatory associations connected with „women“s work.“ She brings in strong, emotional imagery of the African American experience in a medium that also has a strong connection with her heritage. In “Blood of the Slaughtered I,” Magee’s passion and purpose is evident (fig. 7). For this work she gathered names of victims from newspapers and other records of lynching’s that occurred between 1850 and 1940. In regards to this piece she describes her experience in making the work, discussing how she took a moment of recognition and remembrance for each

⁵ Slatkin, Wendy. "Europe and the United States: 1920-1945." In Women Artists in History: From Antiquity to the Present. 4th ed. Alexandria, VA: Prentice Hall, 2000. 197.

name that appears on this quilt.⁶ “Blood of the Slaughter part II” represents all the names of African Americans that were lynched in the state of Georgia (fig. 8). Most of Magee’s works serves as a memorial for those that suffered through slavery and its aftermath and this is what makes her artwork also important as a socio-political statement.

While she has been able to overcome the negative association of craft in her own work, she also has expressed that it is still a remaining issue today, even though to a lesser degree than in the past. She explains that some museums have started including works of craft media in their permanent collections but there are still many communities that are unwilling to accept such works. She comments on the issue saying, “There are even artist colonies that are only open to artists whose work falls within the „fine art“ rubric. In my view, elitism is at the crux of it all.”⁷

Magee is not the only artist that sees the elitism behind the idea that craft media is less important than “fine art.” The Canadian fiber artist, Mary Sullivan Holdgrafer, whose work is self-reflective and addresses issues such as breast cancer, wrote on the “Craft versus Art” debate for an exhibition in 2002 (fig. 9). She states that it is this elitism that inhibits people’s ability to accept works that deny rules or ideals different from their own. Holdgrafer explains that the art and craft divide should be thought of more like a continuum. As an artist working in the middle of this continuum, Holdgrafer expects to be challenged and sometimes neither embraced by proponents of art nor craft.⁸

Magee’s article “I Am an Artist!” encourages aspiring artists to present themselves with confidence when discussing their work with others. She writes of her own pieces and how she has dealt with questions that address the legitimacy of her work as art. One issue she addresses in

⁶ Magee, Gwendolyn. "Portfolio: Narrative." Gwendolyn Magee: Textile Arts. <http://www.gwenmagee.com/narrative.html> (accessed March 6, 2010).

⁷ Magee, Gwendolyn. Interview by author. Email interview. Online, March 6, 2010.

⁸ Sullivan, Mary. "Exploring creativity - Mary Sullivan Holdgrafer - Essay - Craft Versus Art." http://www.exploringcreativity.com/e_craft_versus_art.html (accessed March 11, 2010). 2

her writing is when she is introduced by another as a quilter. She states that she would then respond by saying,

I am an artist- my work presents itself in the format of what is usually thought of as a quilt. [...] Quilting is the tradition from which the type of art that I create began. Think of me as someone who uses textiles and threads as paint, who creates brush strokes using a sewing machine, who can manipulate the materials with which I work into sculptural configurations or into highly textural surfaces that suspend from the ceiling or hang on walls.⁹

Magee urges fellow artists to present themselves with confidence if they are working with unconventional materials. She continues to write, “You sometimes [therefore] have to demand respect for yourself as an artist by not letting others denigrate your work or define your reality.” In the article she talks of “needlework traditionally being considered „women“s work“ in our culture and society. This particular gender bias suggests implicitly that quilting is primarily „busy work“, isn“t serious and therefore is much less significant than any of those „more worthy“ avocations usually associated with the producers of a high level of testosterone.”¹⁰ Magee“s savvy comments within this article show she speaks passionately from experience.

Based on what we know from Magee“s experience and perspective, we can conclude that the art and craft debate is ongoing today. An elitist view among artists and craftsmen seems to be the reason why we still struggle with this issue. Magee embraces elements of both art and craft. Her passion about her community and heritage is evident in many of her works. She views her

⁹ Magee, Gwendolyn A. “I Am an Artist!” Artist Quarterly Newsletter. 04/2005. p 2, 3.

¹⁰ Magee, Gwendolyn A. “I Am an Artist!” Artist Quarterly Newsletter. 04/2005. p 2, 3.

work as a reminder and inspiration for the public: “It speaks for those who have no voices, whose voices have been ignored, whose voices have been silenced. It relates history and circumstances that must not be forgotten.”¹¹ Magee has been able to cross the divide between the arts by connecting craft medium, and important content in a way that is original and creative. I believe that if a body of work can make these connections like Magee’s has, then the work is art and should no longer be subject to the negative connotations associated with craft.

¹¹ Magee, Gwendolyn. "FAQ." Gwendolyn Magee: Textile Arts. <http://www.gwenmagee.com/faq.html> (accessed March 6, 2010).

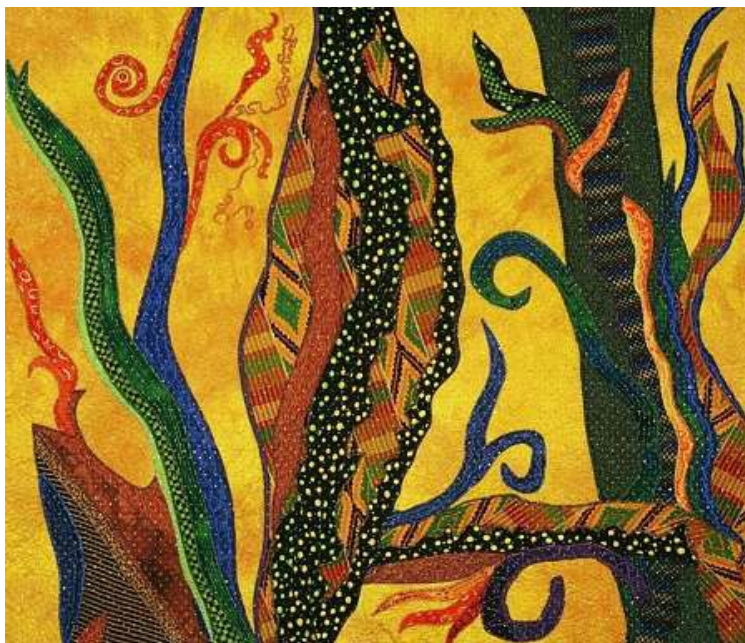


Fig. 1. Gwendolyn Magee
Crystalline Fantasy
34 ½" x 40"
Collection of *Smithsonian American Art Museum*



Fig. 2. Gwendolyn Magee
God of Our Silent Tears II
54" x 70 ½"



Fig. 3. Gwendolyn Magee
God of Our Silent Tears I
36 ¾" x 64 ½"



Fig. 4. Image of a woman from the Weaving Workshop in the Bauhaus.

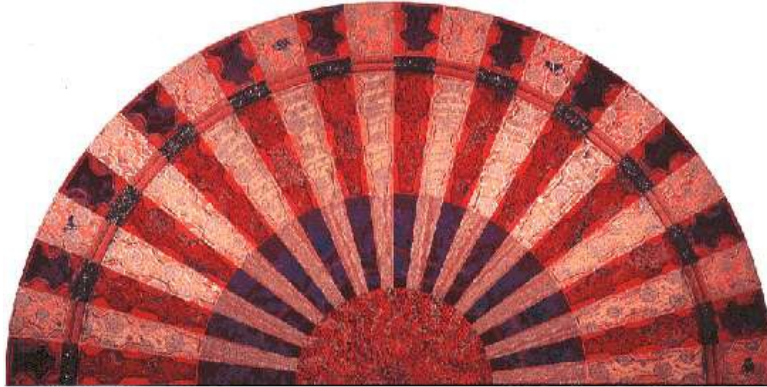


Fig. 5 Miriam Schapiro
Barcelona Fan, 1979



Fig. 6. Joyce Kozloff, 8 cities on the 44th Parallel
Library at MSU Mankato, 1995



Detail

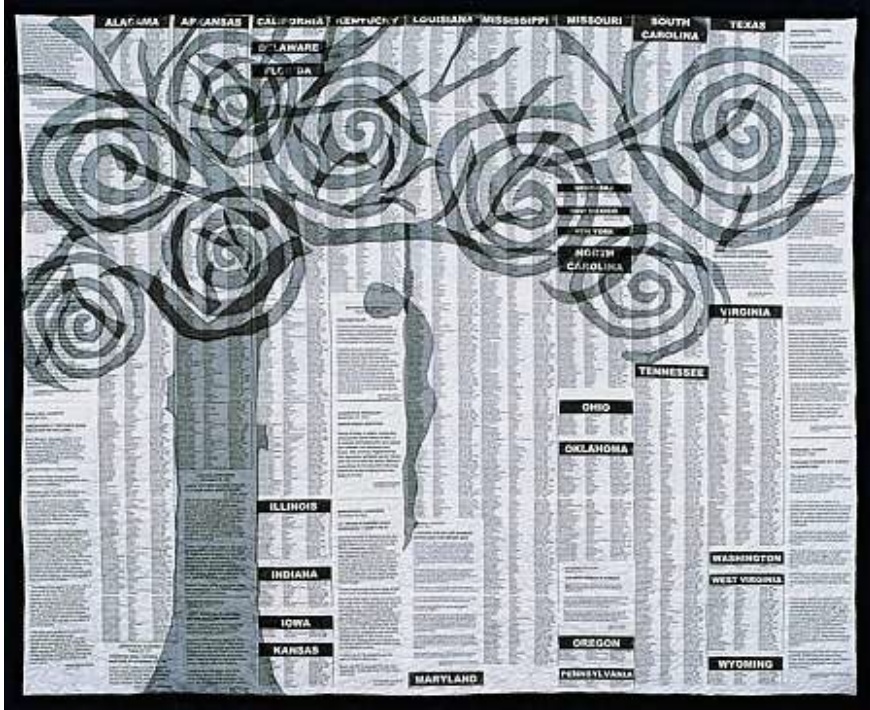


Fig. 7. Gwendolyn Magee
Blood of the Slaughtered I
70 ½" x 85 ½"



Fig. 8. Gwendolyn Magee
Blood of the Slaughtered II
70" x 18"



Fig. 9. Mary Sullivan Holdgrafer
Another in a Million I
28" x 18"

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Author's Biography

Kristin Harsma is a double major student at Minnesota State University, Mankato who will be receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Studio Arts with a concentration in Sculpture and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Theatre Technology when she graduates in May 2011. She is also minoring in Art History and is a member of MSU's Art History Round Table currently serving as Treasurer. As a child she lived in many different places but spent her high school years in the small town of Hills, MN near the South Dakota and Iowa borders. In the fall of 2009, she studied abroad in Florence, Italy taking courses such as Marble Sculpture and Mosaics. While in Italy, she had the opportunity to visit marble workshops in Carrara and the famous mosaic churches of Ravenna. This experience proved to be very inspirational and further opened her eyes to issues within the art world, both past and present. The supposed division between art and craft is something she faces in her own work as a sculptural artist working with the medium of stained glass; and it is an issue she is very passionate in overcoming. She plans to take a year to build up a strong body of artwork after graduating before moving onto graduate school.

Faculty Mentor's Biography

Curt Germundson is an associate professor in the Art Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where he has taught Art History courses since 2001. He received his BA in 1988 from the University of California at Berkeley and his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 2001. Dr. Germundson has published articles on the German collage artist Kurt Schwitters and is particularly interested in the way Schwitters uses the idea of the "Cathedral" in his work in order to create a synthesis of "private" and "public."