

BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Paul J. Smith

Director Emeritus, Museum of Arts and Design (formerly the American Craft Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Crafts)

Conducted by Colin E. Fanning on April 24, 2013 at office of Paul J. Smith, New York, New York

Paul J. Smith was born in 1931 in Batavia, New York, and raised in Bennington and Attica, New York. He attended the Art Institute of Buffalo and the School of American Craftsmen in Rochester. In 1957, he moved to New York to join the staff of the American Craftsmen's Council (ACC), now the American Craft Council and based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Soon thereafter he began his long career at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (MCC), renamed the American Craft Museum (ACM) in 1979 and the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in 2002. As Director from 1963 until 1987, Smith curated many exhibitions that introduced large audiences to craft artists and their work. As Director Emeritus, he developed an independent consulting service to the field. Smith has long been an advocate for the study, presentation, and documentation of craft. He has been widely recognized for his contributions to the field, receiving an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from the New School University–Parsons School of Design, and the American Craft Council's Aileen Osborn Webb Award for philanthropy.

In this interview, Smith speaks of his education, interest in the arts, and experiences as an artist, craftsperson, educator, curator, and museum director. He gives a broad account of postwar studio craft movement in the United States, including the shift from the 'designer-craftsman' ethos of the 1950s to that of the 'artist-craftsman' during the 1960s; the cultural milieu of the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s; and the importance of university art departments. Smith highlights the transferal of ideas and techniques via international and personal connections, and recollects many individuals instrumental to the movement, including artists, craftspeople, patrons, arts administrators, curators, dealers, educators, and writers, most of whom he knew personally. He also reflects upon current scholarship.

Exhibitions discussed include *Designer Craftsman U.S.A. 1953*, *Craftsmanship in the Changing World* (1956), *Visual Communication and the Crafts, Collaboration: Artist and Architect* (1962), *Forms from the Earth: A Thousand Years of Pottery in America* (1962), *Creative Casting* (1963), *Amusements Is...* (1964), *Cookies and Breads: The Baker's Art* (1965), *Object in the Open Air* (1966), *Plastic as Plastic* (1968-69), *Objects: USA* (1969), *The Robot Exhibit:*

History, Fantasy, & Reality (1984), *CRAFT TODAY: Poetry of the Physical* (1986), *The Confectioner's Art* (1988-89), and *Craft Today USA* (1989).

This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

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Colin Fanning (CEF): This is Colin Fanning with the Bard Graduate Center, and I'm sitting down with Paul J. Smith, Director Emeritus of the American Craft Museum, now known as the Museum of Arts and Design. I thought we'd start, if you wouldn't mind, just speaking about how you first became interested in the field of arts and the crafts.

Early Years, Education, and Interests in the Arts

Paul J. Smith (PJS): It began very early. I will attempt to abbreviate this, as it's a rather lengthy story. I was brought up in a rural farming community in Upstate New York—Bennington, New York. From a very young age I was interested in *making* things, like model airplanes. During my one-room-schoolhouse days of elementary education, I had an interest in drawing and won an award in a Victory poster competition. My real encouragement came when I attended Attica High School and took classes in the art program with a very dynamic teacher, Charlotte Ranger. She was an enormous influence and recognized my artistic interest as well as talent and was very, very encouraging. At the time I was also involved with hobby craft. Later, I developed an interest in ceramics, using commercial molds to cast objects, and had a little business of producing wedding plates and objects for special occasions.

The real change came when I moved to Buffalo [New York] to attend the Art Institute of Buffalo, a private school that had a faculty of local artists, including Charles Burchfield, who was a very important influence. He was an exceptional teacher and was very, very encouraging. For some reason, my interest in working with materials was hovering—at the school there was a potter's wheel that I tried, but the school did not have a program in ceramics. Fortunately, I was able to find a very good program at the local Y that was directed by Jean Delius. It was a very well-equipped facility, with a studio for ceramics, wood, fiber, and metal. I began to take classes there evenings and worked in every area, not realizing at the time the importance it would have for my later career.

With my training in the art school, where I'd focused mainly on painting with oil and watercolor, I began exhibiting in local competitions and won a couple of awards. At the Y program, my art training was an advantage when I was learning craft skills. I soon began to exhibit wood turnings and jewelry, and had work included in a few national competitions such as "Young Americans," the American Craftsmen's Council competition for emerging new talent under thirty. I was also in "Fiber, Clay and Metal," the St. Paul Gallery and School of Art competition—that was very encouraging. Simultaneously, I became interested in craft organizations as a way to make connections, and became a member of Buffalo Craftsmen, the local organization, and a new state organization, York State Craftsmen, which had an annual craft fair in Ithaca, New York. At that point, earning a living from your art was not easy—still isn't today—as there was a very limited market. Because I needed to have some income, I found a position in a display department at Flint & Kent, a high-end department store in Buffalo where I eventually became the Director of Display. I make reference to that because it was a very important learning experience as a balance to my artistic training—to be involved with a very competitive retailing environment, one learned important administrative skills.

But the real opening of my horizons to the craft field was my association with York State Craftsmen. I would take my vacation and would volunteer to help set up the fair, employing my display skills, but I also was showing and selling work there. One year I was the featured craftsman with a large exhibit of my work in wood. When I was at the Y, I also took a few evening classes and a couple seminars at the School for American Craftsmen in Rochester, New York, a very important school. There I studied with Frans Wildenhain and Hans Christiansen and met the other distinguished members of the faculty. Through my York State Craftsmen association I became acquainted with other artists in the state, including the faculty at Alfred University—Bob Turner, Ted Randall and others. These contacts opened my horizons of knowledge and interest. So what I'm portraying is kind of path of exploration. I think I've always had an insatiable appetite to learn and to connect with new activities and I have benefited very much from it. I also think I was very fortunate that doors opened at the right time [laughs] when I took the opportunity to pursue some new aspect of my emerging career.

Joining the Staff of the American Craftsmen's Council in New York

CEF: And, well, so you mentioned this sort of tangentially, just now, but how did you first become involved with the American Craftsmen's Council, which is today known as the American Craft Council?

PJS: There again, I was very lucky. The department store I was working in was purchased by another Buffalo store, and the buyer kept their employees and dismissed many of the employees in the store they bought, I being one of them. So I was without a job. I was offered another display position in Detroit and could well have pursued that path, but through a special connection with ACC and the York State Craftsmen [YSC], I was very lucky. I had met David Campbell, the executive director of the ACC, when he came to jury one of the YSC shows in Ithaca—they would give awards and bring someone distinguished in to do that. There he became aware of my work in wood, and invited me to be included in the first exhibition, *Craftsmanship in the Changing World*, when the Museum of Contemporary Crafts opened in 1956. Of course that was a very prestigious association.

CEF: Right.

PJS: David was an exceptional person. He was a professional architect, trained at Harvard, who had been very involved with the New Hampshire League of Arts and Crafts for many years and became involved with ACC first as a trustee and later he joined the staff of ACC. He was deeply devoted to the emerging studio craft activity, and he traveled a lot, such as coming to the craft fair in Ithaca. So when he heard that I was seeking a position, he said, “I think there might be a position open at ACC.” During a phone conversation to discuss a possible job, I was offered a new position to develop educational exhibits and components. It was a special opportunity for me to join a national organization and to move to New York. I’ll put a footnote here that coming from a rural community where there was nothing—except beautiful countryside—I always related to city life. The bigger the city, the better. Moving from Attica to Buffalo was great, and moving to New York City was even more exciting.

So that was how I made the connection to ACC, and moved to New York in September 1957. The Museum of Contemporary Crafts was one year old, and located at 29 West 53rd Street, right next to the Museum of Modern Art. The total ACC staff was housed in the museum building. At that time, the American Craftsman’s Council, as it was called then, published the magazine *Craft Horizons*, it had the new museum program, held the first national conference in 1957, and was developing a national program to explore new ways of extending its program out of New York City since it was a national organization. So I did not join the museum staff, but as part of a new program to develop traveling educational exhibitions and educational components under the direction of David Campbell.

CEF: How would you characterize the initial mission or primary goals of the ACC in the 1950s?

PJS: At that point, it was a very established organization. I will give just a brief historical reference, because I think that's important to understand in the context of this discussion.

CEF: Absolutely.

PJS: Aileen Osborn Webb, the founder of the organization, was from a very prominent family, the Osborn family in Garrison, New York. She married Vanderbilt Webb and became part of that dynasty and was brought up in a privileged life. She was a symbol of that generation of people who were born into wealth and were cultivated to contribute to society and do something with their vast resources. Her financial patronage and support were very important, but more important was her visionary leadership. After being very involved with the Democratic Party in Putnam County, the Junior League and other organizations, during the Depression she felt the need to help people sell their handmade products to earn some money. That modest marketing program led to the formation of Putnam County Products, and then led later to establishing America House in New York, a store for selling handmade products. I'm not going to give the details of the vast empire that Mrs. Webb nurtured—it's well documented—but I want to highlight that all the programs that were developed had a single mission aimed to support the growing studio craft movement in America. She also developed an international connection, which I will speak about later.

It was a pivotal time when I arrived in '57, as the museum became a national showplace for exhibiting work by artists from all over the country. That combined with the magazine and the first national conference held at Asilomar, California in 1957 represented an expansion of the program related to the expansion of the field itself. So I was privileged, I think, to be there at that point, where I was able to act like a sponge to absorb all this that was going on. I was very young, twenty-six years old, my salary was around \$7,000 a year, and I found a fifth-floor, walk-up, cold-water flat on East 70th Street for \$29 a month. [laughs]

CEF: Wow. [laughs]

PJS: So, that portrays my humble beginnings from upstate New York to my involvement with a national organization in New York City. The offices in the museum building were very condensed. The lower two floors were exhibition spaces, and the upper floors housed offices for the museum, magazine, membership, and administration departments. I had a little cubicle ten feet away from the museum office. So while I was not directly involved with the museum program, I was there by association and was really benefiting from all the things that were taking place. I soon became involved with other projects, including planning of conferences and other events. As David

Campbell was involved with so many activities and needed help, I was appointed his assistant. So my focus on traveling exhibitions narrowed as I became involved with many of these other activities.

CEF: Great. Could you speak a little bit about the first exhibition you organized for the ACC? I believe it was a traveling exhibition, as you've mentioned.

PJS: Yes. During discussions with Dave, we talked about the concept of traveling exhibitions and the intent of them, and I suggested one focused on wood, because it was an area that I was very familiar with, but I also thought it would be a good focus. The concept was simply that we should create something portable that would serve as an educational exhibit for schools or at public events. It would familiarize the public or faculty and students with a range of technical aspects as well examples of the accomplished work. It was interesting to research this subject because it brought me in contact with several now-"masters": Wharton Esherick, James Prestini, Sam Maloof, Joyce and Edgar Anderson, and Bob Stocksdale. I met all of these makers, but at that point, they were not as famous as they are now. Another one was George Nakashima. We acquired works, and we created technical components such as a display of forms of joinery. There were also historical and other references that illustrated a range of forms with wood, which included a photo of a large Henry Moore sculpture and Shaker furniture images along with historical examples of wood-turning and other references.

Dave, being a very accomplished designer-architect, created a very handsome structure. It had some problems, in that it was really not that portable, but we did present it at the Boston Arts Festival. It premiered there and it traveled to a few places. Then I did a second one, much more manageable for portability, called *Fibers, Tools and Weaves*, that related to fiber and weaving techniques. We engaged Lily Blumenau, a German weaver who had a studio in the Village, where I also took some courses. She was very helpful in giving technical advice and advising on content. We included contemporary work by Dorothy Liebes, Jack Larson, Ted Hallman, and others. These two exhibits were presented at the museum with the title *Visual Communication and the Crafts*, giving them exposure in New York.

CEF: And then traveled to other venues.

PJS: Yes. Limited travel. I was also exploring other educational components. I began to develop slide kits, which later became the Portable Museum program for renting or selling slide documentation of shows to schools and educational institutions. As there was a lack of registered information on artists I developed reference files, which later became an important research

resource. These programs later developed into the Research and Education Department, which became a very ambitious program.

Becoming Director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts

CEF: So that might be a good point, then, to describe your transition from the ACC into becoming the director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts.

PJS: Again, the door opened. [laughs]

CEF: [laughs] As it always does.

PJS: Being an assistant to Dave was a great experience. He was such a dynamic person, who was motivated to develop and implement expanding programs. As I said before, I benefited from being involved with the conferences and all the other activities and was learning on the job. In 1960, Thomas Tibbs, who was the second director [of the museum]—I should note that there was a first director, Herwin Shaeffer, who was there before the museum opened, and I'm not clear on what happened but he never stayed long enough to realize the opening of the museum. Tom Tibbs was brought in from the Huntington Galleries in West Virginia. I credit Tom for his leadership in establishing a professional museum operation. In 1960, he [Tibbs] resigned to take another position. Dave Campbell, who was at that point president of ACC, having a deep interest in the museum and its future, took on the directorship, which was a full-time position. It was really a big burden. So when that took place, I, as his assistant, was automatically brought into the museum program.

With my display background I was helping with installations, but very soon I also began to research some exhibitions. There was one called *Collaboration: Artist and Architect* that was a personal interest of Dave's, being an architect. It was a show focused on artists doing commissioned work for public spaces and religious centers. I was very involved with that, and I even designed the catalogue—[laughs] a very modest little catalogue. Another one was *Forms from the Earth: A Thousand Years of Pottery in America*. Soon I became engaged in all the museum activity. When Robert Laurer, the assistant director left in 1962 I was appointed assistant director. So I was taking on more and more responsibility. Unfortunately, Dave was pushing himself to an extreme—visiting his family in New Hampshire on the weekends, traveling the country to give lectures, jury shows, and simultaneously direct the ACC and the museum. He was neglecting his health, and in 1963 he had a heart attack and died very suddenly, which was

an enormous shock to me and to the whole field. There was a need to appoint a new director, and I did not ask for it, but I was offered the position in the fall of 1963.

CEF: And all of the burdens therein.

PJS: As I reflect on it, probably being naïve was an advantage [laughs]. It was a very big responsibility and new challenge to direct this important ACC program. While my title was “Director of the Museum,” there was support from associated departments of the organization. Fundraising was limited because Mrs. Webb was absorbing deficits—and so basically, I was more of a chief curator. I was very involved with organizing, planning the program and very involved with each exhibition. We had a very small staff, and payroll, guard coverage, the maintenance of the building, all of those things were handled by the administrative office. I was not removed from that totally, but I was free to be involved with the program.

CEF: In a curatorial sense.

PJS: Yes.

Studio Craft in the 1950s and 1960s

CEF: I want to—shifting focus now—to talk a little more broadly about some of the context and major influences on the field of crafts in this period. In particular, I think craft scholarship has highlighted how the university system played an important role in establishing craft as a coherent discipline. So how did the influence of educational institutions inform the ACC’s activities, or the MCC’s?

PJS: Well, it was very central and very important. As this is a very big subject, I’ll try to give an overview. There was always some form of professional training in craft skills, but it tended to be in vocational training programs or home economic departments. There were a few schools, such as the School of Clayworking at Alfred University that was founded by Charles Binns in 1900, and programs in a few of the private art schools. But it was small in scale, and it was evolving gradually. I always refer to the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement, and its philosophy of reviving the handmade and quality in mass-production was an important influence as we were becoming more and more industrialized in America. So that well documented philosophy was hovering. What was emerging—and I was not *there* in the early part of the century—but as I look at it, it seemed it was in the air. Like many movements, they don’t remain forever. There was a transition. So I feel the “studio craft movement” of the twentieth century was very rooted in the

Arts & Crafts movement, and began to take on its own life in various directions. There was always a certain amount of hobby activity and continuing folk traditions, but I would point out that we are a nation of immigrants, except for Native American traditions, which are very strong but tend to be considered a separate area, one that's still very alive today. Our other traditions were global, with people coming here from all parts of the world to explore a new life where there was the "freedom" to do anything. This has become an important characteristic of America culture in the past and exists today. There were traditional skills that were carried on—folk pottery, quilt-making and rug-making, and various other craft skills that continued what I've always said is the human instinct to make things.

I feel that's a very important point to address, that making and associations with craft are as old as civilization. This was challenged enormously in the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century, but there it continued in a different context. The change began to take place in the early part of the century, but the big change took place after the end of World War II with the influence of the G.I. Bill of Rights, which was important support for returning soldiers to receive free education in every field. That resulted in expanded programs in all schools around the country. It was especially important for the arts, both in the private art schools as well as university art programs. As specialized programs in craft skills were established, they became part of the art departments—for example, when ceramic, metal, or fiber departments or programs were aligned with painting and sculpture departments, that had a profound effect. And the expansion of programs motivated a need for more faculty. There was a shortage of experienced teachers, so many artists from abroad were invited to come to America and some who had already immigrated here, like Anni Albers and Frans Wildenhain, joined programs. In that mid-century era, I refer to the school as a "patron," as it was the environment where faculty had a financial support system and an ideal working arrangement. Schools encouraged faculty to create their own work, believing that to be a good teacher, one needed to be a good artist. So it was competitive. Also, being employed in an academic setting was a big attraction as the market was limited. I should point out that there was also a community of makers who were independent of academia, such as Wharton Esherick, a Pennsylvania furniture maker, and Karen Karnes, a production potter in Stony Point, New York. Many earned their full living—modest, at that time—selling either from their studio or at craft fairs or a few marketing venues. Commercial galleries didn't really exist very much. So there was an enormous change that was taking place in academia, with the faculty developing their own art in every media. I must point out that each specialized area, whether ceramics, the fiber arts, jewelry, metal, or glass all have separate histories.

CEF: Right.

PJS: Each has its own timeline, its own evolution and characteristics, and each is a separate subject to discuss. Not here. [laughs]

CEF: Another day. [laughs]

PJS: But generally, I'm trying to portray the fact that there was this explosion of activity going on. The school was the patron nurturing this, and that it was where most of this new, innovative work was emerging. In looking back, the mid-fifties were a real turning point that escalated during the sixties and seventies.

CEF: So then how did you, at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, engage with this innovative activity?

PJS: I realize I didn't answer the question. [laughs]

CEF: It's great background, though.

PJS: The museum benefited enormously because it was a new national, specialized museum based in New York that was showing work not being shown in other New York museums. The Museum of Modern Art was next door, and it was a very important time when so much was happening in the arts in general. When I became director and was thinking, "Well, what is the role of this museum?" I felt very comfortable about it being an institution focused on reporting on the new. While we did include historical references, we were not the Metropolitan Museum, with its vast collections. We did have a small permanent collection, but the main focus was being a showplace in New York for this emerging, outstanding innovative work from around the country, and some selected work from abroad. Many of the exhibitions were conceived from observing something happening, which became a thematic focus. For example, *Creative Casting*—I began to see a few new metal-casting facilities in schools that were generating some very interesting work, so we did an exhibition reporting on this activity. Many other exhibitions were developed from observing something new and interesting in one area of the country or within schools, where there was an enormous resource of material for these exhibitions. It didn't exclude artists who were not associated with schools, because they were also important.

When you look at the past record of shows, Harvey Littleton had his first exhibition in New York at the museum, and there were many others who had their first showing of work in New York. That was not bad for their resume. [laughs] So we were fulfilling a role, since there wasn't a gallery network and the other museums in the area showing contemporary work didn't show what we

were presenting. The Museum of Modern Art was much more focused on design, although Peter Voulkos did have an exhibition in the Members' Lounge in the sixties. So MCC became a showplace for a lot of work that wasn't receiving exposure in NY. New York, being such a cultural center at that time—it still is—was really important, and many of the shows traveled. Most of them had featured coverage in *Craft Horizons* and generated national press, which was another extension. And the Portable Museum educational kits that documented the exhibitions became an extension. So there were many venues for disseminating an exhibition that originated at the museum.

CEF: Those tie into another interesting question about the crafts in that period, I think. During your research for the MCC and traveling, did you see differences between the kinds of craft activity going on in different parts of the country? Could you discern differences between East Coast and Midwest and West Coast crafts?

PJS: I'll preface that question by saying that I made an effort to travel as much as I could, to jury shows, to visit studios—I think I've been in more artists' studios than most museum directors—because I found it was a way to know what was happening. Also it was pre-Internet—however, photos and slides came in abundance. [laughs] But traveling to see work and research shows was very useful, especially in those early days. National and regional craft competitions were very important, and I juried many, many of them, which was a great way to see work and was a great resource. As for regional characteristics, I would say in general, there was more of a traditional presence on the East Coast, compared to the West Coast, but it was not about palm trees or spruce trees, or big cities or small towns. It was much more about where something was taking place. If you trace the history, you will find pockets of activity in different areas of the country because of a school and faculty.

An example would be when Peter Voulkos, a very accomplished potter from Montana, accepted a position on the faculty of the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles in 1954. In notations on his background, he spoke about the importance of being in California at that time, and how it opened his vision to the contemporary art that inspired his expressive forms in clay—associated with the abstract expressionist art of the time. At Otis he became an enormous influence on the now “academy” of twentieth-century West Coast ceramic artists who studied there. So it wasn't just California, it was Peter Voulkos and the Otis Art Institute. Alfred University in southern New York State was another important center for ceramics. Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills Michigan was important with its distinguished faculty, beautiful campus, and broad program of design and all the arts, which included a program in ceramics with Maija Grottell and textiles with

Marianne Strengell. Another example was the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where Harvey Littleton directed the ceramic program and had an interest in working in hot glass from his early upbringing in Corning. At that point, glass was limited very much to mold-forming, and blown glass was done in factories where a designer would work with technicians to create work. Harvey's obsession with working directly with hot glass led to the famous, now-documented Toledo workshop in 1962 with Dominic Labino. That event was important because it resulted in the creation of small studio facility where an artist could work directly in the medium, a more hands-on involvement than in industrial production.

CEF: Right.

PJS: Once that was developed, Harvey carried their technical achievements back to Madison and immediately began to share his newfound skills with some of his ceramic students, first at his farm and later at the school. I want to make the point about "sharing," because it was central to the exploration of both old skills and new skills and the rapid expansion of activity. Knowledge of skills was very important because to create in a medium, you needed to know how to do it. [laughs] And so there was the benefit of learning old skills, which everyone was learning and sharing, but they were also exploring new technology. Harvey represented the symbolism of the effect of sharing. He could've kept it as a secret! He didn't. He *instantly* wanted to share it, and that was so central to why so much new innovative work with glass developed so quickly and it was very American. So I feel that sharing resulted in an enormous amount of new work amongst students. Very soon, Harvey's students graduated then went to different area of the country and began to develop new glass programs: Marvin Lipofsky went to Berkeley; Dale Chihuly, who emerged later, went to Seattle from Rhode Island and was active there. He founded the Pilchuk School, with the Haubergs—that has become an important glass school. Today, Seattle is a dominant center of glass art.

CEF: Right.

What I'm portraying here is the fact that it was not the regional environment, but it was the institution and the faculty that created a focus and an entity. There were also other centers like the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts or the Penland School of Crafts that attracted students, and often people liked the area and stayed, resulting in a "community." Community was very important in this field at the time to share their common interests. They had a passion for what they were doing, they were proud of what they were creating, they knew they were creating personal original work, but [craft] was not part of the high art trends and the marketplace. The Jackson Pollocks and the Andy Warhols were getting enormous global attention, and they [craft

artists] were getting very limited attention. If they had shown in the Everson National or in some exhibition like *Designer Craftsmen '53* that the ACC organized, that was good. The community aspect I emphasize was important, as there tends to be a bond among people who work with their hands. It was about lifestyle and having a common interest. So one would see communities develop in many areas of the country and often around schools.

[Pause]

CEF: And I think that's a great lead-in now to my next question, which I know is a topic of particular interest to you. In the changing social environment of America in the 1960s, how did you see the crafts reflecting these broader cultural changes?

PJS: Well, as I have said, I saw the museum as reporting on what was taking place. So I was very interested in the breadth of activity in the arts, but also very conscious of what was taking place in New York City at other museums. As a specialized craft museum I felt it important to not compete with MoMA, the Whitney, or the Cooper-Hewitt when it moved uptown. I felt our mission was very clear with a focus on new interpretations of craft and design at that time. There was so much going on. The fifties were a point of expansion and growth and a lot of things were taking place, but the sixties decade was a very pivotal era reflecting a break from tradition.

CEF: In terms of the crafts?

PJS: In terms of the arts in general and culture in America. As we all know it was a time of enormous change. Young people were rebelling against the Vietnam War, but there were also the back-to-the-earth movement, the drug culture, the sexual revolution, and all the cultural changes that were taking place. It was an era celebrating young ideas and their power to do what they wanted to do. [laughs] They didn't feel any baggage or burdens.

But if you talk about the sixties in generalized terms, it was an era of cultural change. It wasn't just America, but it was especially important in America. I speak about that because I was part of it. Now, I was not into communal living and I wasn't into the drug scene [laughs] but I was present. Being in New York, where I was observing all the energy that was taking place, it was reflected in our program, resulting in special exhibitions and participatory events. Keep in mind we were not a history museum. I was an artist [laughs] who was creatively developing a program. Many of the programs we initiated in our small space involved the public in participatory experiences. The openness of exploring new ideas had a dominant influence, and I know it had direct effect on me and my thinking and on the museum and its program.

Museum Exhibitions and Educational Programs

CEF: So could you give some examples, maybe, of exhibitions at the MCC that you feel particularly reflect some of those keys moments or key ideas?

PJS: Yes, while we organized one-person and thematic exhibitions, we had very limited space in our small facility. Although we had a modest collection, we did not have space for it to be on permanent display. Our exhibition space consisted of the main floor, the partial-floor mezzanine, the little gallery, and later the second floor gallery. That was really small space. There was no auditorium for lectures, we had no space for educational programs. So while I felt a need to fulfill a broadened program beyond just showing objects, we often engaged the viewer in some form, integrated educational elements, or turned the museum into a total educational zone with a specific focus. I can highlight a few of them. One of the first exhibitions I did was *Amusements Is...*, which was a focus on objects that reflected, fun, humor, and fantasy. For all exhibitions we did extensive research and the content would evolve. I heard that Charles Eames had designed a “musical tower” that was made for a World’s Fair exhibit, so I contacted him and included it in our exhibit. We placed it in our twenty-foot atrium space. It was a vertical xylophone. So if you dropped a ball in the top, it would play a tune as it descended to the main floor. [laughs] We had other artworks where the public could activate an object, so that was a beginning of a break from “do not touch” to “touch.” The positive public response motivated us to explore other participatory programs.

Another was for Craft Week that was designated by the City Parks Department, when Karen Bacon was head of the parks program. She came to us and said, “Would you like to do something for this week?” and in our discussion, we came up with a banner-making event, which we did. The main floor gallery was turned into a workshop with tables, materials, glue, and blunt scissors so nobody hurt themselves. Those who participated could either make an individual banner or a tile that would become a communal banner. At the end of the week Marilyn Wood, who had been a dancer with Merce Cunningham and was a performance artist, led a parade around Rockefeller Center. We invited people who made banners to participate in the parade.

There were many other events we presented in public space. When we did a show called *Object in the Open Air*, Phyllis Yampolsky and Dean Fleming came to us with the idea of creating a public cartoon performance in the park. As Tom Hoving, was the new Parks commissioner we met with him to discuss the idea. He said, “Let’s do it!” And so we held a cartoon performance on a Sunday afternoon, where we provided paint and brushes and people painted on a long

stretched canvas. It was a very simple idea but it was an outreach into public areas, and it became a symbolic change for use of the park. Its success motivated Tom Hoving to develop other events that became identified as “Hoving Happenings.” So there were many explorations of extending the museum and the craft experience in new forms and places.

CEF: Right.

PJS: The main focus of our exhibitions related to work in the traditional craft media of fiber and metal and wood and glass and ceramics, but we began to explore other areas of creativity such as food and baking. One of the early shows was *Cookies and Breads: The Baker's Art*, which began as an idea for a holiday show. After doing research we realized it was such an important subject that it should be developed as a large exhibition. Well, there may have been, but I don't think there was ever a contemporary show of cookies and breads in a museum. It was controversial and I think that Mrs. Webb and trustees had concerns—but it was an enormous success that generated a lot of press and brought a lot of new people into the museum. There's an interesting analogy: when you're manipulating dough, it's not unlike manipulating clay, and when you bake it in an oven, it's not unlike putting a ceramic form in a kiln. [laughs] The baker is a craftsman in their own way. So to summarize —the environment of the sixties nurtured exploration of new ideas along with the freedom to explore new concepts for exhibitions. Fortunately I didn't have a committee that was reviewing everything in those days—the sixties culture, the explosion of activity in the schools, and the whole environment of what was happening in the arts had an enormous influence upon what we did.

CEF: So, in continuing in that direction, sort of breaking open the “canon” of craft as it existed at that time, I wondered if you could talk about the 1968 *Plastic as Plastic* exhibition, because I think that is another great illustration of what you're talking about.

PJS: Well, that, again, reflected something that was surfacing and important. Plastic was known as a synthetic material identified with fake wood, fake glass, or fake whatever, along with popular materials such as Bakelite. In the 1960s, new, exciting, well-designed products were emerging mainly from abroad, especially Italy, where designers were creating some amazing, beautiful furniture forms and accessories. But there was also some great new work made here like the Vignellis' beautiful dinnerware for Heller. One began to see these new products at Bloomingdale's and some of the specialized stores. In researching the subject, I went to Italy and visited the factories, and with our small staff we assembled a broad range of work for an exhibition. We titled it *Plastic as Plastic* to honor plastic as a material with its own identity. We included a broad range of objects from a heart valve to innovative product designs. It included architecture, it included

handmade jewelry created by Carolyn Kreigman, and sculpture by De Wain Valentine, a California artist who was creating outstanding forms with plastic. So without having any limitations, we assembled this panorama of beautifully created and designed objects that came together as a very important exhibition. I would point out that the craft-making connection was always central. When I went to some of the factories in Italy, you would look at a clean form and think that was just ejected out of a mold. Well, it wasn't. [laughs] There were craftsmen forming and layering and polishing—there was an enormous amount of hands-on activity in a lot of that plastic work. Some products were injection-molded, but also there was an amazing amount of personal work in the designing and making. I always had an interest in the design connection, and brought it in where it seemed to fit. With thematic shows I would include some accomplished work outside the craft-focused work—for example, we showed many artists including Warhol and [Claes] Oldenburg and other artists—in the context of a show. Wayne Theibaud was in one of the shows. So there was an incorporation of a broader area under the thematic idea, and that was the case with the *Plastic as Plastic* show.

Objects: USA

CEF: And another really important exhibition in the sixties that's received fairly extensive scholarship since is the 1969 *Objects: USA* exhibition, and I wondered if you could talk about your involvement with that?

PJS: Yes. That was a very important exhibition, now historically important. It was a very large project that I was associated with that was a concept of Lee Nordness, who had a commercial gallery here in New York that had a focus on painting and sculpture, but he also was beginning to show some of the artists that we were showing like Wendell Castle and a few others. Lee, who was also very enterprising in marketing and promoting artist's work, had done a big survey exhibition called *Art USA* as a result of a connection with the Johnson family—the Johnson Wax Company in Racine, Wisconsin who sponsored the project. Two published volumes document it. When he invited me to lunch in the late sixties, he said that he had a possible interest from Johnson Wax in sponsoring a show focused on work in craft media. To realize it, he acknowledged that the resources of the American Craftsmen's Council would be very important, and asked if I could be helpful. It was a tempting invitation. It evolved very quickly with a concept proposal for a collection of work that would be acquired—funds would be made available from Johnson Wax to purchase works, and at the end of a planned tour, they would be donated to museums. If I would give my time to help on this, a third of the collection would be donated to the Museum [of Contemporary Crafts], and I would have first choice of objects. There would also be a

small financial fee to ACC, I think it was a few thousand dollars, and I would be compensated for travel and other expenses. The big attraction was receiving a group of work for our permanent collection, but I also saw it as an interesting opportunity because I felt that so much was happening, and there had not been a major survey. It was also important that there was a plan for it to travel to museums around the country and Europe. I want to clarify that this was not an idea that came from the museum or ACC, this came from Lee Nordness.

CEF: Right. Right.

PJS: I became very involved with it. That's not documented very much. But Lee, being very organized, handled all the logistics and the work that goes into such a project, and I was there being as sort of a "curatorial advisor." I never really had that title, but I would say I was the consultant curator, curatorial advisor, or whatever term might best identify my role. I was very involved with the *selection*, because I knew the field. From the very beginning, we agreed on a concept that it would not be a new talent show, but portray the spectrum of activity, from those established people like an Anni Albers to a Dick Marquis, who had just graduated from Berkeley in the glass program, and that's in fact what happened. We did extensive research—at that point it was pre-Internet [laughs]—think of how much easier it would have been today. But we solicited slides, we traveled, and made targeted trips. We went to the West Coast and Hawaii, we did a Southern trip, and several other trips. Lee went to some places that I did not go because I couldn't be traveling all the time. But on these trips we had a network of contacts—art schools and university art programs that had craft programs were the first stop, where we'd meet the faculty to get their input of artists in the area we should see as well as work of young artists. We were very conscious of organizing the content to present an esthetic range and represent both functional work as well as sculptural expression. There wasn't a regional requirement, but we did want to be sure that if there was something important in Alaska or in Hawaii that it was included—which we did. So the aim was to do it really as well as possible. There were no restrictions on it in terms of what we could include and the funding to acquire work was made possible through the generosity of the company's sponsorship. A book was published to document the collection.

[The exhibition] premiered at the Smithsonian, National Collection of Fine Arts—that was important and symbolic, to be in our nation's capital. It was launched with the company's public relations office, Carl Byoir, that promoted it nationally and internationally. Aline Saarinen was at the opening and did an NBC "Today" Show report. Later when it was in New York, I was interviewed by Barbara Walters on "Today." So it had vast visibility. And when it went to twenty-two "art" museums around the country—the tour is well-documented—it generated enormous

interest. There was also a film produced, *In Praise of Hands*, that featured profiles on a few of the artists. Johnson Wax bought an hour of prime-time on ABC, which was an important venue for visibility of the project. The show also traveled in Europe to eleven cities, where it had great response and there was always a professional PR effort that generated enormous press coverage, which it deserved. In looking back—its visibility, presence in major museums, and the press it generated—was very significant at the time and it was the right time [laughs] to portray the exciting work being done in the craft media at the end of the sixties.

CEF: There was sort of a critical mass by that point.

PJS: Yes. And being shown in a professional way, honoring these makers appropriately. I know it had an enormous effect—there's no way you could ever record its result, except that people told me it inspired them to collect, inspired them to open a gallery as they were very impressed with work they had not seen before. I remember Joan Mondale told me she went to see it three times [laughs] and there were many others who told me that they had seen it and it really inspired them. I also think it had an influence on the market. At the time, selling work was very limited to craft fairs and a few galleries around the country, but in the seventies, one began to see new galleries emerge. If you look at the history of these galleries, many of them started at a time when the market began to expand, which nurtured serious collecting. Now, this wasn't just because of *Objects: USA*, but I feel that *Objects: USA* was an important influence that exposed people to this activity. It was timely and it really did have a good result that's hard to record.

CEF: To quantify?

PJS: Or qualify.

Reaching New Audiences

CEF: Well, and that seems to fit in with one of your more general efforts, through the MCC, to expose new audiences to the crafts and to making. And I'm thinking explicitly about the idea of drawing younger audiences to the museum and its exhibitions, whether it's through *Amusements Is* or *Cookies and Breads*, which you mentioned earlier, or even later shows like *The Robot Show* in 1984 or *The Confectioner's Art* in '88. So, I'm wondering, what made children such an important audience for you, in terms of planning exhibitions?

PJS: I wouldn't say only children—my overall interest was reaching new audiences. [laughs] And that included grandparents along with children and families. I began to see that some of these

participatory programs and educational programs we were doing were attracting families, where the parents would bring the children, and I always loved to see the children making a banner, but I was happy when the parents also did it as well. They were bringing the children to entertain them, and then *they* got involved. [laughs] So there was an underlying, very abstract educational motive. I was not coming to it as a trained educator, “this is the way you educate,” as I was not coming to the directorship of the museum as “this is the way you are a curator.” [laughs] I was coming to it in a very open, creative way, and as I think about it, in the context of the time, my training in the arts was very central to developing this program. On occasions where I had the advantage to work with several student in art history programs or Bard Graduate [Center] interns on projects, I always give sort of a “senior recommendation” [laughs] to say, “You know, you might consider taking a course, in painting, ceramics, or some other area of the arts to experience the process.” Because I think there is value in having the real experience of creating. I think it brings an understanding to the scholarship.

Changing Vocabulary

CEF: That’s great. So, moving on now to the seventies, in 1979 the Museum of Contemporary Crafts changed its name to the American Craft Museum. Could you talk about some of the reasons behind this change, and maybe the impact it had on exhibitions or other activities?

PJS: I’m going to preface my answer to that by talking about changing vocabulary over a period of time. At the turn of the century, if you look at names of organizations, many of them used “Arts and Crafts,” which was coming out of the Arts and Crafts movement. And in the thirties, “handicrafts” was used with several organizations. This was not exclusively, but you saw that reference appear. What I’m illustrating is that terminology changes over a period of time, and in the arts, it’s very understandable, because the creative process represents change. What was done last decade is going to be different in the next decade. And that’s why we have descriptive periods for the decorative arts and design—Art Nouveau, Moderne, and all the different terms applied to contemporary art such as Abstract Expressionists, Pop Art, et cetera. So it is a constant challenge to have vocabulary that applies or has meaning forever. I am very experienced at this subject, having dealt with it so much with the word “craft” and its associations. I have a very basic approach: either you use old terminology and interpret it in a new context, or you develop new terms. That’s my answer to it. [laughs]

Continuing on from the thirties, “handicrafts” was a reference at times. “Designer craftsmen” began to appear in the fifties—for example in the important 1953 show *Designer Craftsmen*, which was the title of a national competition that the ACC premiered at the Brooklyn Museum.

Later “craftsmen” was adapted to craftsperson to not have a bias. However, this was never an issue as there was always a balanced representation of women makers along with male makers, and that was documented one time by Rose, the editor of the magazine. Yes, Rose Slivka did a study and stated that there were more women artists in the magazine than any other art magazine. It was accurate—and there was never an issue at the museum. “Craftsman” was used without gender reference. “Designer” came in to add clarification as it seemed like the word “craftsman” needed something more—“we’re more than just makers, more than just about skill.” So if you were a Sam Maloof, a furniture maker, or a Margaret DePatta creating jewelry, it added clarity to what they were doing. In other words, it’s original and it is intentionally designed to be whatever it was designed to be.

CEF: That’s Rose Slivka?

PJS: I should add that it was not in the context of industrial design, although there were a handful of people like Dorothy Liebes and Jack Larson who were designing for the textile industry, Jack Prip for silver companies, and a few others related to the ceramic and glass factories.

This subject came up in early conferences of ACC, where the design focus was considered as an important area. In my opinion, it’s always been one of the weakest areas of the studio craft field and I think that has to do with the structure of schools, where industrial design departments were in one area teaching design in a theoretical way, and the studio craft departments were teaching skills as part of the art programs and often connected much more with creative expression in the context of the arts in general. Many of the European schools have a much more balanced approach—especially in the Scandinavian countries, Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany, where there has been a much more focused training of skills towards being a designer for production in a factory. At Arabia in Finland or Kosta Boda in Sweden, these companies had a strong design program and a structure to support a design team.

CEF: But training with hand skills?

PJS: Training with hand skills, but also training with the idea of designing prototypes for production. That has never been very strong in America. But to go on with changing title references in America, the “designer-craftsman” emerged to “artist-craftsman” in the sixties, and that’s quite understandable. [laughs] Because it was a time when those creating with ceramics or fiber were seeking identity: “we’re artists, so we are artist-craftsman.” This changed terminology was not used exclusively, but it followed a path of searching for terms that would correctly characterize their work. It ultimately came down to a personal choice. Sam Maloof would state “I

am proud to be a craftsman.” There were others who totally ignored it and benefited from the exposure they got, or said, “Well, I’m an artist.” [laughs] Many didn’t need a label as it had to do with the fact that their work was so good, like Bob Arneson, a very important ceramist who was identified with the “Funk” ceramic movement at [the University of California] Davis. He was a master artist creating in the medium of clay, but he wasn’t obsessed with labels.

The title “Museum of Contemporary Crafts” or later “American Craft Museum” was seldom a problem in inviting artists in all areas of the arts to exhibit. An example was Peter Voukos, when I discussed a major show and said, “We would like to do a retrospective on you, would you be willing to cooperate on that?” And he said yes. Now, he could have said no. [laughs] But he remembered how important his beginnings were, when Mrs. Webb acquired some of his work to sell at America House and commissioned him to make the lamps in the conference room for the new museum [laughs], he remembered that. And he was very sincere. While he considered himself an “artist,” he didn’t ever purposely or intentionally say “craft is a bad word” or “this organization is a bad organization.” I think he knew where he was, he honored it, and I think he taught his students to create and be themselves. And that’s a big credit to him and the enormous following he has. So to sum up on this complicated subject, the descriptive words are useful—they are not the defining answer. It’s ultimately the artist and their work and what it is that is the message.

CEF: So with that name change from the Museum of Contemporary Crafts to the ACM—

PJS: In 1979, as the Council was expanding, and Mrs. Webb’s involvement was lessening there was a broadening activity with a Board of Trustees. Like all organizations, there’s always a concern about the future resulting in strategic planning.

CEF: Market research, or—

PJS: Well, marketing research, or surveys, or think-tank gatherings coming together to clarify the present and future direction of an institution. It’s something that organization boards do to develop a long-range plan. And in our case, David Finn, who was a partner in Ruder and Finn, a New York advertising agency, was on the ACC board and played a pivotal role in arranging to have his firm do a study on the organization and create a report. In this report, there was a recommendation for a name change, because they felt that we were a composite of important programs that did not convey that the divisions were all one organization. It would be no different than a corporation most known for one product when they had many other products—there was a need clarify all the divisions. For ACC, if you have a magazine, a museum, a national program,

and a marketing program, you need to clarify the connections. So they recommended that the Museum of Contemporary Crafts become the American Craft Museum, *Craft Horizons* [become] *American Craft*, and the American Crafts Council [become] the American Craft Council.

CEF: To tie it all together.

PJS: So it all came together with a big bow on top. [laughs] As a corporate concept it made sense. Well, I never had any input to it, and inherited it once it was voted on by board. It wasn't totally a wrong concept. But in my opinion it didn't work. Adding "American" wasn't wrong, except we were not only American. "*Craft Horizons*," in a way, had a more visionary concept. "Museum of Contemporary Crafts" was much clearer. The change to the "American Craft Council" was good, but I don't think it ever had any effect. [laughs] And I can say that it didn't have any effect on what I did. I just went on to do what I felt was important to do. But I don't think that most people, if they saw "American Craft Museum," said, "Oh, that's part of the American Craft Council." They didn't know that any more than they did before. So as name changes have come up, including MAD's, I've often thought about that subject. My thinking on this subject is that a name is important for any organization in the arts. If you're dealing with the past or history, like a historical society, it's easier to have a title that lasts. When you're dealing with contemporary art, it's more difficult. If the Museum of Modern Art opened as a new institution, would it call itself "Museum of Modern Art"?

CEF: Because the terms keep changing—

PJS: I don't think they would. The Whitney Museum and the Guggenheim happen to be on safer ground because it's a family name, and my main point here is that the name is important, if you're a photography museum or a computer museum or whatever, but ultimately if you're not a historical museum or a specialized museum, it's what you *do* that you're known for. And I think that a name is important for identity, but I feel that there's probably no perfect solution to these names. I make the point that I think the program clarity and focus is what is really important. And what you do and the message you convey with your program is what's most important.

CEF: Right. And what stands the test of time, hopefully.

PJS: Yes, exactly.

CEF: That's actually a great segue, the idea of adding "American" to the name of the museum, because I'd really like to talk about international connections in craft. So could you describe—this is another huge topic, of course—but would you describe how you've seen the relationship existing between American crafts and crafts in other countries, at various times?

International Connections

PJS: It is a big subject, and I'll try to simplify my perspective on this. I would say there's always been an international connection—

CEF: Even—especially—going back to the Arts and Crafts movement—

PJS: Yes. I spoke earlier that craft traditions are as old as civilization, so you're dealing with that aspect. As the focus of this interview is on the twentieth century—Europe was especially was important as a resource. An example being the Bauhaus, and educational programs in Scandinavia and other European regions that had a big influence on development of programs in American schools. Cranbrook in its beginning years was made up of faculty from Scandinavia. The School of American Craftsmen had several faculty members from abroad including Tage Frid and Hans Christiansen. Another example was the New Bauhaus in Chicago with [László] Moholy-Nagy and Black Mountain, with the Albers. So there's a pattern of international connection that was really important in some of the early schools, along with immigrants coming here with their own heritage.

Returning to the sixties generation, the founding of the Peace Corps during the Kennedy administration, the ease of travel, and the interest among young people in traveling the world indicated the beginning of a new global connection. Young people became very interested in traditional cultures in Africa, India, and in Asia—it was just an enormous attraction. The fascination with past cultures in terms of the traditional skills that existed was very important and an influence. To focus on the textile arts, the ikats of Indonesia, tie-dye techniques, and the felting in central Asia—all of these were interesting resources that people were studying and wanting to learn. It was not only the aesthetic quality of these textiles but the techniques that became popular. Remember the tie-dye T-shirts in the sixties [laughs], the ugly tie-dye T-shirts in the sixties—they were not all ugly, but they were very popular. These traditional techniques were also being practiced to create new innovative work. Much of this took place in textile departments. So that was yet another connection of international influence. Studio glass had its own international connections. After the successful Todedo workshop, many of the artists, including Harvey Littleton and Marvin Lipofsky, visited glass centers of Europe like Venice and Czechoslovakia to

make connections and observe work being created. So the international connection in the sixties was very important.

I will now focus on the formalized international connection with the founding of the World Craft Council in 1964. In 1957 ACC began a series of national conferences that were held in different parts of the country, which are documented. In 1964, when the World's Fair was in New York, Mrs. Webb, the staff and trustees decided that it would be a good time to have an international conference. Mrs. Webb took a personal interest in making this happen, as she envisioned the formation of a world organization. I have quotes from Mrs. Webb about expressing the importance of a gathering with people engaged in the crafts from all parts of the world to share their common interests. It would also include representatives of craft organizations and marketing programs. I also think she also thought that ACC was doing very well, so, "let's move on to the world."
[laughs]

CEF: So was that the genesis of the World Craft Council?

PJS: Yes, what resulted was the First World Congress of Craftsmen, which was held at Columbia University Teacher's College here in New York. It took a lot of effort to develop this ambitious event. The staff was very involved in planning the program. We had several meetings to discuss who would participate, and there was a lot of preliminary research to develop to an invitation list. Margaret Patch volunteered her time to travel around the world to make contact with organizations and people to invite. Her research identified individuals like Pupil Jayakar, Director of the India Handicrafts and Handlooms Export Board and Rubin de la Borbolla, Director of the Museum of Popular Art in Mexico. When the conference took place there were over six hundred attendees from the U.S. and two hundred and fifty from forty-six countries that came for this gathering. Built into the agenda was the idea of forming a world organization. I was present at the meeting when it was formally organized as the World Craft Council.

Mrs. Webb had a great interest in this new organization, and she became very involved for the rest of her life. It resulted in a network of organizations—the founding of the Australian Craft Council and Canadian Craft Council, as there was the need to have an organizational structure with representatives from each member country. This was a very important event because it brought people together and it resulted in a conferences in Switzerland, Peru, Mexico, Austria, Japan, and the last ones that I attended was in Australia. I went to all of them. Each was a very exciting opportunity where you benefited from exposure to the culture of the country and meeting artists and people who were actively involved with organizations. And in countries like Peru or even in Japan, traditional work was also much a part of it. In Mexico I remember Peter Voukos

demonstrating on a potter's wheel next to some traditional potters. Peter didn't speak Spanish, but there was a bond between them. [laughs] And it celebrated, really, Mrs. Webb's dream, about people-to-people and the importance of common interests in the world. I think deep down, with all the programs that Mrs. Webb nurtured, there was always this kind of underlying, humanistic importance of a better world, where people are sharing common interests.

CEF: Which seems to be very much a part of that sixties spirit, or—

PJS: Yes. Well, I think it's still important today. [laughs]

CEF: Oh, of course. [laughs]

PJS: I want to talk about one other event at the '64 conference. As this took place two years after Toledo workshop, Harvey Littleton shared his new studio hot glass skills, and set up a small facility at Columbia University and demonstrated blowing glass for attendees from all over the world. A few years ago at one of the SOFA panel discussions, Erwin Eisch and several others who were present were talking about the importance of their presence at that event, where they saw this hands-on facility. So the global connection was taking place in reverse where the influence from Europe in glass was becoming an American influence.

CEF: On Europe?

PJS: On Europe and internationally.

CEF: So it's all a cycle—

PJS: I use this event as another example of the international connection. Today studio glass has a global connection as well as an international market. I'm highlighting only some of these pivotal events that were bridges to a connection and a broader aspect of the field.

CRAFT TODAY: Poetry of the Physical

CEF: And that, I think, is also a good transition to talk about the *Craft Today* exhibition, which itself became a vehicle for American ideas—but it had its start earlier, in 1986 was when it first opened at the ACM. Could you talk about that?

PJS: 1986 was the thirtieth anniversary of the museum and the year when we opened a new expanded space at 40 West 53rd Street, in a new building that was constructed on the site of our

44 building. In exchange for our land and building, our trustees negotiated for a condo space on the street level and below. This followed a previous move from the east to the west side of the street—our buildings were always in the way of real estate development. The 29 [W. 53rd St.] was torn down because of the residence tower that MoMA built. Fortunately, Mrs. Webb had acquired a building across the street where we moved. We were no more than settled there then the Hines Corporation and CBS wanted to develop that land with the tower that's there. [laughs] So wouldn't say we were a "victim," but we were certainly a result of real estate development in mid-Manhattan, and it wasn't a bad outcome. The developer's first interest was in our moving and giving us money, but our board took a very active position and said "we want to stay there." So, to make a long story short, it resulted in our getting a condominium space for the trade of our building and air rights.

So when the American Craft Museum opened in 1986 in this new multilevel space, it was an exchange of our building for a condo, which was an advantage for us to have a permanent facility. It was also an opportunity for expansion of the gallery space—not huge, but it was bigger, and being right across from the Museum of Modern Art was great. It was opened on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the museum, which was an occasion to celebrate both the anniversary and the new location. In discussing possibilities on what we should do, and having been involved with *Objects USA*, I thought an updated survey would be good focus for an opening exhibition. After extensive research, it resulted in an exhibition called *CRAFT TODAY: Poetry of the Physical*. A book documenting the exhibition records the work that was exhibited. For researchers I would mention that in the back of the book is a timeline that's a very useful resource for the history of organizations, schools, periodicals and events. Many references I am making in this interview are listed in the timeline.

CEF: Oh, great. Could you talk a little bit about the title? Because it's such a great, evocative title.

PJS: Okay. Well, we explored many titles, including *Objects USA II*, which I think the Johnson Wax Foundation turned down. When we engaged Edward Lucie Smith, the British critic and writer, to do an essay for the book, during my meeting with him I asked him for his thoughts on an appropriate title. His response was "Poetry of the Physical." I thought that was a brilliant term, but then felt that if you just called it "Poetry of the Physical," it would be not clear enough to convey the content and focus, so I added "CRAFT TODAY" in capital letters, subtitled "Poetry of the Physical." I always thought it was a wonderful reference. Although, you know, people often shorten it in reference to the first or second part—like the Museum itself was often referred to as the "Craft Museum." [laughs] The exhibition was launched with great fanfare, a week of openings,

a lot of press, and was followed by a national tour to five museums in the United States. We were very fortunate to have Phillip Morris sponsor the exhibition at the point when they were doing enormous corporate funding in the arts. I had an interest in an international tour, and when some of the CEOs of Phillip Morris came to see the exhibit, they said, "This would be a great show for Europe." And I said, "Yes, it would." [laughs] So I immediately followed up, and it led to our approaching the United States Information Agency, because they had toured some of our shows in Europe and Asia, including *Objects USA*. So we had a connection there.

And so the partnership between Phillip Morris and USIA was very, very important, because this was no small project. It was a major undertaking to deal with the logistics of moving a large show of somewhat fragile objects across the Atlantic and on to the exhibiting museums, along with coordinating each opening and other details. Well, it wasn't necessarily the Atlantic in the beginning, but a meeting was held with USIA and Phillip Morris when we decided the focus would be Europe. And then the next step was *what* areas of Europe. USIA played a very important role in doing that by making contact with their network in each country—in those days, a telex was sent, saying that the exhibit was going to be available. We had a great response, and what started out for showing in eight cities ended up at fifteen. It premiered in Paris at the Musée des Arts Decoratifs, part of the Louvre. When the tour began, I had left the museum to become Director Emeritus, but continued to work on projects I had initiated. Since I had free time at that point, I was commuting back and forth to make site visits and attend each opening. There is a report that contains information on each showing and the great response it received. What was most important about it was a couple things: one was that the timing was very important. It was also important in America because like *Objects USA*, [it] was a major survey of what was happening at that time, but the field was so expanded that there were many talented artists that couldn't be included. The European show, I refined a bit taking into consideration the logistics of travel and the European audience. I felt the title *CRAFT TODAY: Poetry of the Physical* may be a problem with translation, so I came up with a shortened one, *Craft Today USA*.

It is interesting to note that the tour coincided with the historic event of the Berlin wall coming down and the opening of the Eastern bloc countries. I had made research visits to Czechoslovakia and Poland during the Communist era. With the changes in government taking place, the show opened in a free society. So I was there during a really interesting time. [laughs] I was in Berlin when the wall was coming down, and being chipped away, and witnessed all of that. The show was originally going to be in East Berlin, but it was changed to Leipzig. On a site visit I traveled from Leipzig to Prague the week that Czechoslovakia opened. So the tour of the exhibit paralleled the change in governments—and one of the benefits of this project was a personal one

for me, to witness that history. The showings these cities were timely. In Warsaw, it attracted 40,000 visitors in one month—in Moscow, 20,000. They rationed the catalogues because there was such a demand for them. One never knows the results, but I think in general, from the many press interviews and public response, each showing was a great success. The openings were always well-planned with the Minister of Culture often present, and an American ambassador or some official from the U.S. Embassy present. I think its purpose, from the standpoint of our government, was as an official cultural presentation. And it fulfilled its goal, as it was truly a wonderful venue for promoting American culture abroad through an aspect of American art that was very understood and respected by the many people who viewed it in each country. As we talked about the international connection and the influence from Europe in the early days, one can see a reversal where American work is an influence today. This was verified in the response to the tour of *Craft Today USA*. Viewers of the exhibition were really amazed to see the innovative American work. Many of the press made comments on their surprise of what's happening in America.

However, the tour also had challenges. In Greece, the designated site was a temporary exhibition facility with no professional staff or security, and I had to meet with the Minister of Culture to work out a plan, and it turned out to be one of the best presentations. I canceled on my trip to Ankara on a Friday night because the Gulf War broke out that day. [laughs] But the exhibit was to open that weekend. So again, world events paralleled the tour. There are many personal stories I could tell, but overall I think it was a great success. At the end of the tour, some of the works were donated to MAD for the permanent collection. There is a good document and reporting on each site.

CEF: I've seen that report—it makes for really interesting reading. Great, well, I guess I just wanted to wrap up, after this wonderful interview, just getting your thoughts on the current state of scholarship on craft. Whether in the academy or—

Scholarship Today

PJS: I would begin by saying I'm very pleased to see increasing scholarship. [laughs] And I applaud that, because I had a privileged part of that twentieth-century studio craft activity, and I thank everyone who was involved and associated with the many programs I initiated. It was a lot of work, but having been part of it, I know a lot of the aspects of it. In thinking back, I wish more documentation would have been done, but catalogues and archives on each exhibition do exist at the American Craft Council library in Minneapolis. Their website has selected material and they have many more digitized references. But at the time one didn't think of historical importance.

[laughs] As all history clarifies with time, it's now appropriate to begin to look at that activity in the arts in the mid-twentieth century and interpret it in the context of the past and what is taking place today. I'm finding young people are becoming interested, including you and colleagues at the school in the excellent Bard Graduate program. Almost weekly I receive an inquiry by email or a phone call from someone doing research or writing a book and wanting to know or confirm some information. I happily share it, because I feel that accurate documentation is very important. Unfortunately, many of the artists and people who were involved with organizations are no longer on earth and there are some big gaps in documentation. All the past issues of *Craft Horizons* are a wonderful reference, but it's what's not in *Craft Horizons* that's important, as well. [laughs]

So I applaud this increased interest in scholarship. I refer to the "studio craft movement" as an important part of the twentieth-century arts. I think that it will have a growing historical importance because of the outstanding work that was created in that period. There were so many artists that created outstanding innovative work in each craft media. I am very involved with the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, and I was just talking with a curator about how important some of these artists in the fifties and sixties were in developing new concepts in the traditional mediums. Lenore was an example of engineering a way to create woven forms on a loom that were sculptural, very innovative expressions at the time. She moved to New York in '57, at the age of fifty, and was living on South Street in an artist community with neighbors Robert Indiana, Jack Youngerman, and Agnes Martin, who were all friends. That community now has great interest. Recording of all of these kinds of contextual associations is so important. So that's where art scholarship comes in. I'm very pleased that the twentieth century is being studied not only at Bard, but at other schools with art history programs. So I encourage it, and I think it's very, very important. I don't necessarily agree with everything that's been written [laughs] and I think that's understandable. It's also interesting to observe how what you've been associated with is being interpreted. And some of that is, and should be, fresh interpretations.

CEF: And ever upward, right?

PJS: Right. Right.

[End of the interview]

[wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_J._Smith_\(arts_administrator_and_curator\)](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_J._Smith_(arts_administrator_and_curator))
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