

The  
Crafts  
of  
MEXICO



ARTES  
DE MEXICO



**M**ADE BY HAND, THE CRAFT OBJECT BEARS THE FINGERPRINTS, REAL or metaphorical, of the person who fashioned it. These fingerprints are not the equivalent of the artist's *signature*, for they are not a name. Nor are they a mark or brand. They are a sign: the almost invisible scar commemorating our original brotherhood and sisterhood. Made *by hand*, the craft object is made *for hands*. Not only can we see it; we can also finger it, feel it. We see the work of art but we do not touch it. The religious taboo that forbids us to touch saints—"you'll burn your hands if you touch the monstrance," we were told as children—also applies to paintings and sculptures. Our relationship with the industrial object is functional; our relationship with the work of art is semi-religious; our relationship with the craft object is corporeal. Indeed, the latter is not a relationship but a contact. The transpersonal nature of crafts finds direct and immediate expression in sensation: the body is participation. To feel is primarily to feel something or someone not ourselves. And above all, to feel with someone. Even to feel itself, the body seeks another body. We feel through others. The physical and bodily ties binding us to others are no less powerful than the legal, economic and religious ties uniting us. The handmade object is a sign that expresses society not as work (technique) or as symbol (art, religion) but as shared physical life. ~

The pitcher of water or wine in the middle of the table is a point of convergence, a little sun uniting everyone present. But my wife can transform that pitcher pouring forth drink at the table into a flower vase. Personal sensibility and imagination divert the object from its ordinary function and create a break in its meaning: it is no longer a vessel to contain liquid but to display a carnation. This diversion and break link the object to another realm of sensibility: imagination. ~

This imagination is social: the carnation in the pitcher is also a metaphorical sun shared with everyone. In its perpetual movement back and forth between beauty and utility, pleasure and service, the craft object teaches us lessons in sociability. At celebrations and ceremonies its radiation is even more intense and total. At celebrations the collectivity communes with itself, and this communion takes place through ritual objects that are almost always handmade. While the celebration is participation in original time—the collectivity literally shares the date being commemorated among its members, as if it were sacred bread—crafts are a sort of celebration of the object: they transform a utensil into a sign of participation. ~

*Opposite page*  
*Majolica pottery for*  
*everyday use.*  
*Tonalá, Jalisco.*  
*Nineteenth century.*  
*Private collection.*

*Pages 8–9*  
*Cloth used in the*  
*fiesta of Saint*  
*Bartholomew.*  
*Venustiano*  
*Carranza, Chiapas.*  
*Pellizzi Collection.*

*Page 10*  
*Pitcher.*  
*Clay modeled*  
*over a Sayula slip*  
*and burnished.*  
*Jalisco region.*  
*Nineteenth century.*  
*8 x 8 1/4 in.*  
*Montenegro*  
*Collection,*  
*Instituto Nacional*  
*de Bellas Artes.*



*Duck-shaped  
pitcher from  
Ocotlán.  
Burnished clay.  
Tlaxcala, ca. 1945.  
11 3/4 x 6 x 8 in.  
Ruth D. Lechuga  
Folk Art Museum.*

*Opposite page  
Pear-shaped bottle.  
Talavera ceramics  
from Puebla.  
11 1/2 in. tall.  
Franz Mayer  
Museum.*

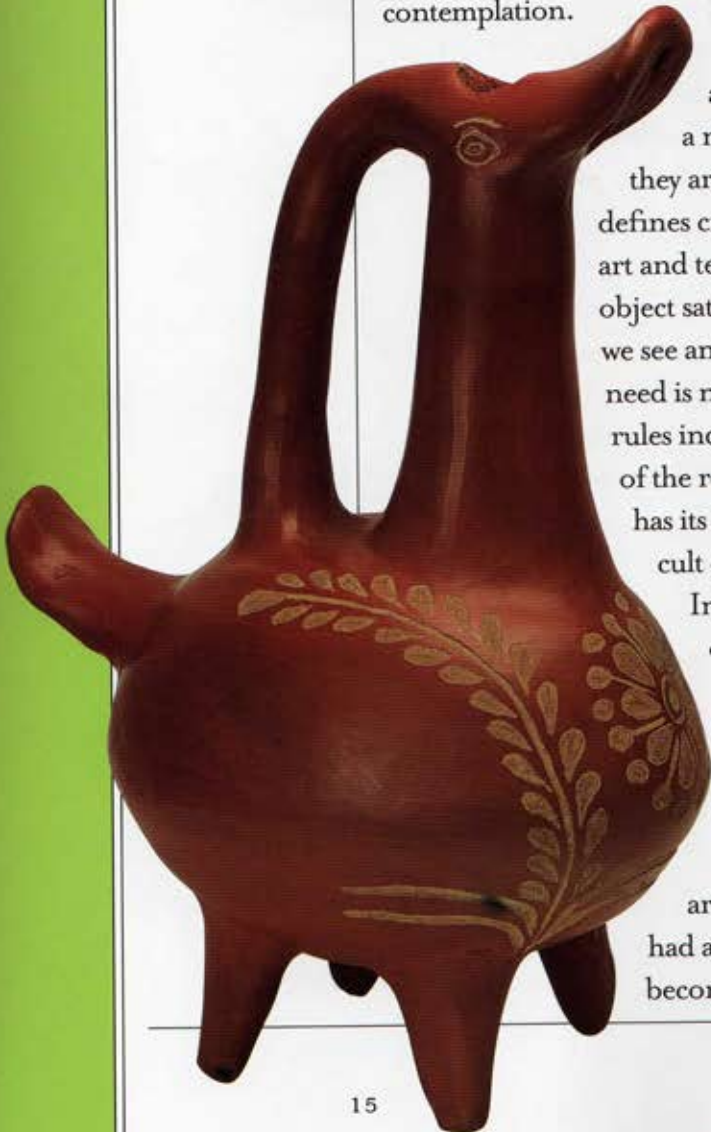
#### A LESSON IN FANTASY AND SENSIBILITY

A glass pitcher, a wicker basket, a *huipil* of coarse cotton cloth, a wooden bowl—handsome objects not in spite of but because of their usefulness. Their beauty is an added quality, like the scent and color of flowers. Their beauty is inseparable from their function: they are admirable because they are useful. Handicrafts belong to a world existing before the separation of utility from beauty. ~

The industrial object tends to disappear as a form and become one with its function. Its being is its meaning, and its meaning is to be useful. It lies at the opposite extreme to the work of art. Craftsmanship is a mediation; its forms are not governed by the economy of function but by pleasure, which is always wasteful expenditure and has no rules. The industrial object forbids the superfluous; the craft object delights in embellishments. Its predilection for decoration violates the principle of usefulness. The decoration of the craft object ordinarily has no function whatsoever, so the industrial designer—obeying his implacable aesthetic—does away with it. The persistence and proliferation of ornamentation in handicrafts reveal an intermediate zone between utility and aesthetic contemplation.

In craftsmanship there is a continuous movement back and forth between utility and beauty; this back-and-forth motion has a name: pleasure. Things are pleasing because they are useful *and* beautiful. This conjunction defines craftsmanship, just as the disjunctive defines art and technology: beauty *or* utility. The handmade object satisfies the need to take delight in the things we see and touch, whatever their everyday uses. This need is not reducible to the mathematical ideal that rules industrial design, nor is it reducible to the rigor of the religion of art. The pleasure that crafts give us has its source in a double transgression: against the cult of utility and against the religion of art. ~

In general, the evolution of the industrial object for daily use has followed that of artistic styles. Almost invariably, industrial design has been a derivation—sometimes a caricature, sometimes a felicitous copy—of the artistic vogue of the moment. It has lagged behind contemporary art and has imitated styles at a time when they had already lost their initial novelty and were becoming aesthetic clichés. ~





Contemporary design has endeavored in other ways—its own—to find a compromise between usefulness and aesthetics. At times it has managed to do so, but the result has been paradoxical. The aesthetic ideal of functional art is based on the principle that the usefulness of an object increases in direct proportion to the decrease in its materiality. The simplification of forms may be expressed by the following equation: minimum presence equals maximum productivity. This aesthetic is borrowed from the world of mathematics: the *elegance* of an equation lies in the simplicity and necessity of its solution. The ideal of design is invisibility: the less visible a functional object, the more beautiful it is. ~

This is a curious transposition of fairy tales and Arab legends to a world ruled by science and the notions of utility and maximum productivity: the designer dreams of objects that—like genies—act as intangible servants. This is the opposite of the craft object, a physical presence that we assimilate through our senses and in which the principle of usefulness is constantly violated in favor of tradition, imagination, and even sheer impulse. The beauty of industrial design is conceptual: if it expresses anything at all, it is the accuracy of a formula. It is the sign of a function. Its rationality makes it fall within an either/or dichotomy: either it is good for something or it isn't. In the second case it goes into the garbage. The handmade object does not charm us simply because of its usefulness. It lives in complicity with our senses, and that is why it is so hard to get rid of it—that would be like throwing a friend out of the house. ~

#### A LESSON IN POLITICS

Modern technology has brought about a great many profound transformations, but all in the same direction and with the same import: the extirpation of the *Other*. By leaving the aggressiveness of the human species intact and by making its members uniform, it has strengthened the causes tending toward its extinction. Craftsmanship, on the other hand, is not even national in scope: it is local. Heedless of boundaries and systems of government, it outlives republics and empires: the pottery, basketwork and musical instruments seen in the frescoes of Bonampak have survived Mayan priests, Aztec warriors, colonial friars and Mexican presidents. They will also survive American tourists. Craftsmen have no country; they are from

*Huichol votive  
gourd decorated with  
beads.*

*6 1/4 x 1 1/4 in.*

*Diameter 19 3/4 in.*

*Ruth D. Lechuga  
Folk Art Museum.*

*Opposite page*

*Carved bull's horn  
combs decorated*

*with permanganate.*

*San Antonio la Isla,  
State of Mexico.*

*Ruth D. Lechuga  
Folk Art Museum.*







*Artisan making  
castillos (fireworks  
structures).*

*San Martín de las  
Pirámides,  
State of Mexico,  
1963.*

*Photo: Ruth D.  
Lechuga.*

*Opposite page  
Castillo (fireworks  
structure).*

*Los Remedios,  
State of Mexico,  
1950.*

*Photo: Ruth D.  
Lechuga.*

their village. What is more, they are from their neighborhood and their family. Craftsmen defend us from the unification of technology and its geometric deserts. By preserving differences, they safeguard the exuberance of history. The craftsman does not define himself in terms of either nationality or religion. He is not loyal to an idea or image but to a practice: his craft. A workshop is a social microcosm governed by laws of its own. The artisan seldom works by himself, nor is his work overly specialized as in industry. His workday is not ruled by a rigid time schedule but by a rhythm linked more to his body and sensibility than to the abstract necessities of production. As the artisan works he may talk with others and sometimes sing. His boss is not an invisible figurehead but an old man who is his master and almost always a relative, or at least a neighbor. It is revealing that, despite its markedly collectivist character, the craft workshop has not served as a model for any of the great utopias of the West. From Campanella's City of the Sun to Fourier's Phalanstery to Marx's Communist society, the prototypes of the perfect social man have not been artisans but priest-sages, philosopher-gardeners and the worker of the world in whom praxis and science are conjoined. Of course I do not believe that the craft workshop is an image of perfection. Yet I think that its lack of perfection points to how we might humanize our society: its imperfection is that of men and women, not of systems. Because of





its size and the number of individuals that make it up, a community of artisans favors a democratic way of life; its hierarchical organization is founded not on power but on skill: masters, journeymen, apprentices. In short, craftwork is an occupation that involves both play and creation. After giving us a lesson in sensibility and imagination, craftsmanship gives us one in politics. ~

#### A LESSON IN LIFE

The artist of old wanted to be like his predecessors, to make himself worthy of them through imitation. The modern artist wants to be different; his homage to tradition is to deny it. When he seeks a tradition, he looks for it outside the West, in the art of primitives or other civilizations. Because they negate Western tradition, the archaism of the primitive object and the antiquity of the Sumerian or Mayan object are paradoxical forms of novelty. The aesthetic of change requires that each work of art be new and different from those preceding it; novelty in turn implies the negation of immediate tradition. Tradition becomes a succession of abrupt breaks. The delirium of change also governs industrial production, though for different reasons: each new object—the result of a new process—ousts the object preceding it. The

*Huacal (basket for carrying a baby).  
Cuetzalan, Puebla.*

*Opposite page  
Woman weaving  
hat.*

*Tlapa, Guerrero,  
1966.*

*Photo: Ruth D.  
Lechuga.*



*Opposite page*

*Petate.*

*Natural and dyed  
palm, woven with  
variations.*

*Santa Cruz,*

*Puebla.*

*Pages 24–25*

*Basketry pieces  
made with different  
techniques and  
materials.*

history of craftsmanship is not a succession of inventions or of unique (or supposedly unique) works. In reality, crafts do not have a history, if we conceive of history as being an uninterrupted series of changes. There is not a break but a continuity between its past and present. The modern artist has embarked upon the conquest of eternity, and the designer upon that of the future; the artisan allows himself to be vanquished by time. Traditional but not historical, linked to the past but bearing no date, the craft object teaches us to be wary of the mirages of history and illusions of the future. The artisan seeks not to conquer time but to be one with its flow. Through repetitions that are imperceptible but real variations, his works endure... ~

The fate awaiting the work of art is the air-conditioned eternity of the museum; the one awaiting the industrial object is the garbage dump. Craftwork escapes the museum, and when it does end up in its showcases, it acquits itself with honor: rather than a unique object, it is merely a sample. It is a captive example, not an idol. Craftsmanship does not go hand in hand with time, nor does it seek to conquer it. Experts periodically examine the signs of decay on artworks: cracks in paintings, lines that have blurred, changes of color, the leprosy that eats away at both Ajanta's frescoes and Leonardo's canvases. As a material thing, the work of art is not eternal. And as an idea? Ideas too grow old and die. But artists very often forget that their work holds the secret of true time: not empty eternity, but the life of the instant. The work of art, moreover, has the power to nourish human spirits and to be reborn, even as negation, in the works that are its descendants. ~ For the industrial object there is no resurrection; it disappears as rapidly as it appears. If it left no trace whatsoever it would be truly perfect; unfortunately it has a body, and once it has ceased to be useful, it becomes mere refuse that is difficult to dispose of. The indecency of waste is no less pathetic than the indecency of the false eternity of the museum. ~

Craftsmanship does not aspire to last for millennia, but at the same time it seeks no early death. It follows the course of time from day to day, flowing along with us, gradually wearing out, neither pursuing death nor denying it, but rather, accepting it. In between the museum's time out of time and the accelerated time of technology, the work of craftsmanship is the pulse of human time. It is a useful object but also a beautiful one; an object that endures through time yet meets its end and assumes this fact; an object that is not unique like the work of art, but replaceable by another similar yet not identical object. The craft object teaches us to die, and by doing so, teaches us to live. ~ TRANSLATED BY HELEN LANE. ~