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“If you want a golden rule that will fit everything, this is it: Have nothing in your houses you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.” This quotation from 1882 by designer and reformer William Morris sums up the underlying philosophy that a master of the Japanese style of pottery imbued his students with in the 1960s and 1970s. His thought was that true genius in art was to combine the beautiful with the utilitarian. He urged us to surround ourselves with beauty, and we would feel beautiful. The true craftsperson creates things of beauty that are a joy to use.

The catalog for the current exhibition *Defining Craft* at the Davenport Museum of Art (DMA) repeats the quotation, and the show itself does an excellent job of providing diverse examples of what people have called “crafts” and of how craft and art are moving closer together. It is well worth a trip to the museum.

For me, a craft object – as opposed to an art object – is something whose utility is not marred by its beauty. There are artistic chairs, tables, and other useful objects that are so ornate or delicate that one would never consider using them. On the other hand, some objects have a form that fits their function with a beauty and grace that *invites* us to use them.

Some objects from this exhibition can be used to illustrate the continuum from art to craft. Take the work of Dale Chihuly. This exhibit features wine goblets and a wine bottle, while an exhibit at the Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago is now showcasing his art glass. While I might use the goblets for drinking, I doubt I could use the bottle for decanting or storing wine. On the other end of the spectrum are the glass-sculpted flowers planted throughout the Garfield Park Conservatory.

Chihuly’s goblets provide a great example of my concept of a fine craft; they are beautiful objects that invite you to use them. They are made of a dark violet, almost opaque, glass, and the stems have an organic vine-like quality that supports the tulip-flower bowl.

His wine bottle is a beautiful object, but it does not invite me to use it. (That being said, the object is still named by the artist as a utilitarian object – a wine bottle.) The bottle lies on its side, resembling the bladder of a water skin, and its neck undulates and protrudes from the bladder. The curves of the neck and shape of the bladder would make the pouring of a measured amount of liquid into a smaller drinking glass a true challenge. The way the form inhibits the function moves the wine bottle away from utilitarian beauty and toward artistic beauty.

If you can’t get to Chihuly’s exhibit at Garfield Park in Chicago, Harvey Littleton’s *Falling Blue* in the DMA exhibit is the next best thing. These bent translucent blue tubes are simple versions of Chihuly’s undulating, weaving, organic shapes. What Littleton’s glass tubes have in common with Chihuly’s is that both are glasswork for the sake of glasswork; they are shapes created for the viewer’s pleasure in experiencing them, and they don’t pretend to be useful.

I was intrigued by Wendy Manuyama’s *Homage to Jimmy Carter*, which is the title that the museum label gives the piece. The catalog calls it simply
Cabinet, 1991
. Until I saw the catalog title, I wasn’t sure what the item was. To me, it looked like a stylized

elephant or a wooden version of Picasso's dog outside the Chicago Civic Center. The title drew me in more than the multi-colored painted wood and caused me to wonder, as I'm sure the exhibit's curator wanted me to, what the difference between craft and art was. The actual space that this cabinet creates to store things is about 5 percent of the space that it occupies. It is not a beautiful work of art, but it is clearly artistic. And an object that takes up 24 cubic feet to create one-half cubic foot of storage space tells me that a cabinet is not this object's main reason for being.

Perhaps both the high and the low of this show is Jack Earl's *Dog*. The piece is a life-size ceramic sculpture of an old dog complete with goop leaking from aging eyes, warts, patchy fur, flaky skin, tongue hanging out, and a raging hard-on. I can't do better in summing up the feeling of the piece than Lori Roderick does in her Community Voices commentary: "He's somebody's uncle. … He might have been at my wedding, warts and all, up close to the dance floor watching my college roommates dance their shoulder straps loose. He didn't smell quite so rank back then, but then his wife was alive and his daughter hadn't moved away with her second husband. Then he had someone to match the green-and-gold-plaid sport coat with his pants (although he always favored white athletic socks with everything). Doesn't he remind you of an old dog *you* know?"

The show takes another look at the evolution from craft to art, and the catalog has two essays that give opinions on what craft is becoming. The boundaries between art and craft are being removed as our society comes to value beauty more and more, and this exhibit documents that blurring of the boundaries.

For a sampling of the Community Voices component of the project, click here .