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Crafty artists create good show [Review of the Exhibit "Objects U.S.A." at the Milwaukee Art Center, Milwaukee]

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By Curtis L. Carter

In recent years many young and often very good artists have turned their attention to crafts.

"Objects: U. S. A." is a collection of recent craft objects in every media which is showing at the

Milwaukee Art Center through June 6. The collection, put together by the Johnson Wax Company, reflects dramatic changes in the creative works of contemporary American artist-craftsmen.

Great diversity is the one mark which the 307 objects in wood, metal, glass, ceramics, enamels, fiber and plastic by 250 different craftsmen share. They range from fine silver and metal work to an earthen ware and an enamel sculptured tennis shoe. Some are functional and decorative--the finely crafted pieces of furniture and ceramic pots, while others are purely decorative.

The exhibit is significant testimony to a substantial revival of the craft tradition. Mass production, the destruction of Indian cultures in the United States, and the loss of interest in hand crafted quality items severely hindered the development of

craft in America for many years. The apparent incompatibility of individual quality workmanship and the realization of the profit motive all but wiped out significant American craftsmanship. Among the young today, however, the interest in crafts has been revitalized.

"Objects: U. S. A." naturally raises the question of the relation of craft to fine art. The fact that the objects are being shown in museums, and art centers traditionally reserved for the "fine arts" is an important social factor in blurring the always vague distinction. The additional fact that most of the objects are done by "artists"--persons who exhibit superior skill in their chosen media--is also a challenge to the distinction between "art" and "craft." The objects are, for the most part, made in a studio and are intended to be viewed, contemplated, and in some cases used. This show makes it evi-

dent that no hard and fast line between the two can be assumed to hold.

Despite the fact that these objects meet many of the conditions we expect of art, and display a high degree of creative vitality, few have previously been shown in galleries and museums. This is partly due to a kind of artificial division between art and craft which simply no longer holds. From time to time critics must revise their categories. If galleries and museums are to remain the major vehicles for presenting art objects, they will have to expand their offerings.

The exhibit suggests that now is the time for revision in critical categories and for rethinking of what is to be displayed as art. It is time to give craft its due as art.

Accordingly, the Milwaukee Art Center performs an important service by bringing to our attention the place of craft in art.