

The "C" Word, by Bonnie Wach, 10/17/2004

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The dilemma: A smooth-as-satin walnut chair stands in the middle of a room, its rich grain looking almost warm to the touch, its joints seamlessly dovetailed, its seat carved with two inviting dips right where each cheek of your derriere would go. And you're tired. But you're also in a museum. And the chair is part of the exhibition. Do you sit in it?

"Absolutely," insists JoAnn Edwards, executive director of the new San Francisco Museum of Craft+Design, which opens Saturday at 550 Sutter St. "Not only can you, but you should. Craft is about good design, but it's also about function. We plan to have 'sit on it' signs around the galleries."

It's a nervy approach both from a conventional museum-exhibition standpoint and from the viewpoint of many craft institutions, which have struggled for decades to change the perception that crafts -- furniture, jewelry, glasswork, ceramics and other nonpainterly pursuits -- are fodder for hobbyists at flea markets and street fairs, and not fit for the hallowed halls of high art.

In fact, says Edwards, many museums have been systematically expunging the "c" word from the fine-arts lexicon over the past two decades.

"People are afraid of the 'craft' label because they think it's associated too much with potholders and macrame," she says, citing as a case in point Oakland's California College of Arts and Crafts, which changed its name to the broader California College of the Arts in 2003.

Edwards and her brother, Seb Hamamjian, the museum's co-founder and associate director, believe the newest offering on San Francisco's cultural landscape will resonate with ordinary folk as well as expand their thinking about the boundaries of art.

"We want to educate the public about what craft is, and show them that good design is good design. It doesn't have to be perfect or even sophisticated," Hamamjian says. "I'd rather have a badly crafted piece that is beautifully designed than a horribly overdone piece that is meticulously made."

The 3,500-square-foot space, diminutive by museum standards, is in the former home of Edwards' Tercera Gallery (she still operates branches in Palo Alto and Los Gatos). [The siblings hired Oakland architect Alan Ohashi, who is also designing the National Japanese American Historical Society museum at Crissy Field, to reconceive the gallery as a museum.](#)

Along with a gated front courtyard, a large entry space and two exhibition rooms, the museum will house a finely edited gift shop ("no shelves filled with all sorts of clutter," Edwards says) and will host docent-led tours and a regular speaker series featuring artists and collectors. Admission will be free through 2004; \$5 for adults and \$3 for students and seniors thereafter.

The museum's long-range goals, Edwards says, are to become accredited and to amass a permanent collection -- an ambitious plan for even an established institution at a time when arts budgets are being slashed, and when the everyday realities of unemployment, terrorism and gas prices would seem to eclipse the public's nobler, gentler instincts.

Amazingly, the duo, who between them have 45 years of experience running commercial galleries, have raised nearly \$1 million in less than two years to launch the Museum of Craft+Design.

Hamamjian believes unrest and uncertainty in the world have actually brought about renewed interest in craft. "I think it has to do with nesting, wanting to feel comfortable," he says. "In an impersonal world, you want to have things in your home that are extremely personal."

To that end, the museum debuts with the inaugural exhibition "Dovetailing Art and Life: The Bennett Collection," an eclectic celebration of art and craft that mirrors this philosophy. Cultivated over a lifetime, the collection of internationally renowned Alameda-based furniture designer-artists Sylvia and Garry Knox Bennett is a unique amalgamation of the practical and the extremely personal -- connected through the Bennetts' unerring eye for beautiful design.

Some 45 objects comprise the show -- much of it furniture and all of it culled from the Bennett family home -- ranging from Gordon Peteran's witty "Table Made of Wood," a jigsaw collage cobbled together from unfinished wood scraps, to Sue Wheatley's deceptively minimalist maple bench, a platform stacked with a thick pile of felt upholstery rectangles that are secured by steel straps. These works are augmented by five of Garry Knox Bennett's own pieces, as well as sculpture, ceramics, glass, drawings and paintings by Roy De Forest, Jack Ogden and others.

Bennett, who's represented in collections from the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was once considered an outsider in the world of furniture-making, where his unorthodox methods of crafting without plans or drawings and refusal to use dovetail joinery were derided as unprofessional. His collection, like his art, reflects this same irreverence toward conventional standards.

"I think the public will come in expecting a lot of furniture and will be surprised by the number of paintings and drawings and sculpture," Sylvia Bennett says. "But that's the excitement of having a nonspecific collection. Suddenly you can focus on an individual object, and not just its genre. In our house, we've never had a room full of matching genres. We just bring in a piece and place it. It doesn't matter what color, what period, and somehow over time it all works."

The Bennetts also hope the genre-bending exhibition will help elevate craft beyond its plant-hanger image.

"It doesn't matter what the medium is. It's the individual elements, the design, that rises above the craft label," Sylvia Bennett adds. "We don't need to figure out if it's art or craft. Ultimately, it figures itself out."

"Dovetailing Art and Life" will run through Jan. 30. The museum will follow it with "Weddings: New Traditions for the 21st Century," an exhibition of mixed media that examines objects and idols used to celebrate weddings.