

american craft

New Horizons
for Ceramist
Kathy Erteman

Twin Cities
Crafts Abound
in the Land of
10,000 Lakes

A Century Ago
Omega Workshops
Led British Artists
to the Applied Arts



Castanet Dance

CRAFT IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

STORY BY
Joyce Lovelace

Craft has a strong, if somewhat unexpected, presence these days at two high-profile Los Angeles museums. Beyond showing representative objects, both places are connecting craft to other disciplines as part of a bigger story. Both also celebrate craft's collaborative essence, but in strikingly different ways.

At the venerable Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens in suburban San Marino, a new wing devoted to American art makes inspired use of craft in a rich historical narrative. A world away in trendy West Hollywood, the Museum of Contemporary Art explores the convergence of craft and technology at the vanguard of design and architecture practice.

Seeing craft in two such dissimilar venues and contexts may be counterintuitive, but that's part of the fun. To use a showbiz analogy (this is L.A., after all), it's like watching an underappreciated actor shine in supporting roles in different films—one a big-budget historical epic, the other an experimental short. Both hits.

THE HUNTINGTON

Right: In the Mid-20th-Century Gallery of the redesigned Virginia Steele Scott Galleries, Sam Francis's *Free Floating Clouds*, 1980, occupies a wall next to a case of silver work by Allan Adler.



Huntington photos/Tim Street-Porter, MOCA photos/Brian Forrest.

MOCA

Right: Adam Silverman and Nader Tehrani's *Boolean Valley*, 2009, a recent installation at MOCA Pacific Design Center, the first in its series "Craft and Computation."





THE HUNTINGTON

Left: Sam Maloof's *Double Music Stand* and *Musician's Chair*, 1972, of Brazilian rosewood, were commissioned by a noted violinist. The painting above is by Karl Benjamin.



MOCA

Left: The 400 cut-clay objects in *Boolean Valley* are arranged in an undulating landscape derived from Boolean logic, named for George Boole, a 19th-century mathematician.

THE HUNTINGTON: CRAFT IN AMERICAN HISTORY

A visit to the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens is an interdisciplinary experience on a grand scale. Set on 120 acres, the former estate of the railroad magnate Henry E. Huntington encompasses a scholarly research center, a world-class art museum, and spectacular grounds. It's an oasis of beauty and culture, a rare expanse of green in Los Angeles.

"You see objects from a different perspective, having walked through the gardens," observes Jessica Todd Smith, curator of the Huntington's American collections, which are showcased in the newly expanded and redesigned Virginia Steele Scott Galleries, opened in May. American art is a relatively young but growing focus at the Huntington, an institution best known for British and French art of the 18th and 19th centuries, including such famous works as *The Blue Boy* by Thomas Gainsborough and *Pinkie* by Thomas Lawrence.

"One of the joys of being curator of a small collection is that you have the great luxury to think in interdisciplinary ways," says Smith, who, in planning the reinstallation of the Scott Galleries, did just that. On her team were Kevin Murphy, an assistant curator at the Huntington, and guest curator of decorative arts Harold Nelson, whose areas of expertise include modern and contemporary craft. Together they arranged a selection of 500 masterpieces into thoughtful groupings of painting, sculpture and decorative arts: a Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington with porcelain wares owned by the first president; Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic Husser House dining table and chairs with Arts and Crafts pottery and a Byrdcliffe cabinet; a 1990 silver tea service by Michael Banner with

MOCA: CRAFT AND THE COMPUTER

Computer technology has brought about dramatic change in the way objects and buildings are designed and assembled, opening up a range of forms and fabrication methods once unimaginable.

"Some would say that this spells the end of handcraft. We don't agree," says Benjamin Ball of the Los Angeles-based Ball-Nogues Studio, which creates experimental installations that engage and transform spaces. "In our case, digital information informs handwork. We are not, however, using handwork in a nostalgic kind of way. Handwork is necessary to our processes and we use it to aesthetic ends."

Hand meets machine with transcendent results in the exhibition series "Craft and Computation" at the Museum of Contemporary Art's gallery at the Pacific Design Center. It evolved out of "seeing how a lot of younger architects and designers are working now," explained Brooke Hodge, the former curator of architecture and design at MOCA, who initiated the series this past spring (she was among 17 staff members laid off in May by the museum, which cited financial difficulties). "They have access to very sophisticated digital technology and equipment, but they're definitely very interested in craft. Often they're designing digitally, then when it comes to the fabrication and assembly, reverting to craft techniques to render what they want to do on an architectural scale." And far from losing the individuality of handwork to a machine, they're using technology to realize once-impossible dreams.

Boolean Valley, the debut show, came to MOCA March 22 through July 5 from the Montalvo Arts Center near San Jose, where it was

silver from the 1700s. The resulting mix highlights continuity and connection across centuries and disciplines.

The installation unfolds in loosely chronological order, starting with the Colonial period, over 16,000 square feet in a series of 15 gorgeous galleries designed by Stephen Saitas. One of the revelations is just how close to the present the American collections come. Entering the last space, visitors may be forgiven their first reaction: modern abstract art? At the *Huntington*?

Sure enough, the Mid-20th-Century Gallery heralds a bold and unprecedented step into new terrain for this august institution. It's the largest space, a dramatic setting for the work of artists such as Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Motherwell, Joseph Cornell, Ed Ruscha and Louise Nevelson. Here, as in the earlier period rooms, craft objects share pride of place with painting and sculpture. "The emphasis is on the creative spirit," not the medium, Smith says. When, during the planning stages, the curators thought about handcrafted furniture for this gallery, "the first person who came to mind, of course, was Sam Maloof." The famed woodworker, then in his 90s and still producing in his studio in nearby Alta Loma, was not yet represented in the Huntington collection, but was the quintessential American designer-craftsman.

A bit of backstory: in 1972 Jan Hlinka, principal violist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, commissioned Maloof to make a music stand with a pair of racks to accommodate two players, as well as a practice chair that would provide good back support and plenty of leg and elbow room. Maloof obliged, crafting handsome designs in Brazilian rosewood. The two men became friends, and at the musician's request, Maloof never replicated the chair. When Hlinka

curated by Julie Lazar. A collaboration between Adam Silverman and Nader Tehrani, it presented 400 cut-clay objects arranged into an undulating topographic landscape derived from Boolean logic, which was developed in the 1840s by the mathematician George Boole and is the basis for modern digital computer science.

Silverman and Tehrani have been friends ever since both were architecture students at the Rhode Island School of Design, and had always wanted to do a project together. Silverman was a practicing architect and had a hip-hop clothing business with the Beastie Boys before becoming a full-time ceramist in 2002; now well known for his earthy, elegant pots, he's currently studio director at the Heath Ceramics store in L.A. Tehrani is a professor of architecture at MIT and a principal with the Boston-based firm Office dA. Over the course of a year, the two designed *Boolean Valley* together on the computer, then Silverman made prototypes that were fabricated for the installation. Their objective was a work that would reflect their shared interest in material, but also be true to their individual skills and vision.

"The core of what I do is, I sit at a stool and make a wheel go around in a circle, and with my two hands I make round things," Silverman says. "That's what I like to do, and I don't want to change. But I loved doing this," he says of the project. "For me, the advantage of using the computer in this context is the kind of horsepower you have. With just pencil and paper, it would have taken us three years longer than it did, and it would have been less interesting. We were able to come up with so many iterations. It was freeing in terms of exhausting the possibilities."

died, his widow, recognizing the importance of the pieces, returned them to their maker.

Familiar with these works and the lovely story behind them, the Huntington curators went to see Maloof in 2008 and asked to borrow them for the Scott Galleries. He agreed, and as a complement, also loaned from his personal collection a group of important pieces by studio craft masters—ceramics by Paul Soldner, Gertrud and Otto Natzler, Laura Andreson and Harrison McIntosh, a glass plate by Glen Lukens, a turned-wood vessel by Bob Stocksdale.

Today *Double Music Stand* and *Musician's Chair* are radiant in the gallery, and in good company. Above them hangs a geometric painting by Maloof's old friend Karl Benjamin. *Free Floating Clouds*, a massive 1980 canvas by their fellow Southern Californian Sam Francis, commands an entire wall. A case is filled with sleek accessories by Allan Adler, "Silversmith to the Stars." Maloof's craft objects are there, along with two Lukens ceramics from the Huntington trove and a stunning Peter Voulkos vase on loan from the collector and dealer Frank Lloyd. It adds up to a snapshot of the lively artists' community that thrived in California in the early post-war years—a fitting tribute to Maloof, whose gregarious nature and generosity of spirit epitomized that collegial side of the craft field.

The bittersweet twist is that Maloof never got to see it all: he died on May 21, nine days before the opening of the wing. But the deeply American qualities embodied in his work, of ingenuity grounded in tradition, resonate throughout the Scott Galleries, helping bring history to life.

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Like Silverman and Tehrani, the Ball-Nogues partners have cross-disciplinary leanings and eclectic backgrounds. Ball did architectural design as well as set design for film; in the early 90s he worked on music videos by Janet Jackson, Marilyn Manson and Nine Inch Nails. Gaston Nogues spent over a decade with the celebrated architect Frank Gehry's firm, where he was "the go-to guy for unusual models, product prototypes and full-scale mockups of building systems," says Ball. For their MOCA installation (July 26–November 15), organized by Alma Ruiz, they've expanded and reinterpreted an environment they did for the 2008 Venice Architecture Biennale—an elaborate contrivance of thousands of strings, hung in space in catenary curves to form a kind of dense rolling fog. A custom software program was used to create iterations of catenary arrays; Ball-Nogues also designed and fabricated a machine, called the *Installer*, to measure and cut the individual lengths of string as determined by the computer. Then they gathered a bunch of friends and colleagues together for the actual installation. As Ball explains, "Our work is often very intricate and requires a lot of labor. Often it's done without many financial resources. We make up for that with human resources."

Technology may liberate handwork, but handwork offers a human counterweight to the distance and isolation technology sometimes creates. "One of the big rewards our work provides is the community it fosters between collaborators," Ball says. "We try to mix work with a bit of life."

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