AmericanCraft

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Uncommon Beauty in Common Objects

Organized by the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio, where it opened (October 23-January 31, 1994), the exhibition "Uncommon Beauty in Common Objects: The Legacy of African American Craft Art" introduces the wealth of creative expression of African Americans working in a variety of media. The touring edition of the exhibition, with 120 works, is currently at the American Craft Museum in New York (March 17-June 12) and travels to Atlanta, Dallas, San Diego and Washington, DC, through June 1995. A 112-page catalogue edited by Barbara Glass, with texts by Nkiru Nzegwu and curator Willis "Bing" Davis, 42 color photographs and artist portraits by Jon Onye Lockard, is available from the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, P.O. Box 578, Wilberforce, Ohio 45384 ($19.95 plus $2.75 postage).The symposium "Toward Definition: An Examination of African American Craft Art," held in November in conjunction with the exhibition, is reported by Sharon Fitzgerald (page 8).

Photographs by David Barker

above: Nathaniel Bustion—*Brownstone Series #30,* 1988, stoneware, ash glaze, 37"x 20"x 16". opposite page top left to right: Tom Miller—*Mardi Gras King,* mixed media, 39"x 18⁴/₅"x 16⁴/₅"; Frank Cummings—*On the Edge Naturally,* 1990, kingwood burl, mother-of-pearl, 18k gold, 12"x 7"; Angela Franklin—*I Never Learned to Tap Dance, My Shoes Go Unworn,* 1990, cloisonné enamel, sgraffito, 32⁴/₅"x 23³/₅"x 6". middle left to right: Xenobia Bailey—*Zulu Queen Harvest Fire Coat,*1990, cotton acrylic blend, crocheted, 45"x 30"x 19"; Acquaetta Williams—*African Mask, Gold,* 1993, glass, mixed media, 15³/₅"x 16²/₅"x 3", technical assistant Karen Lamonte; David MacDonald—*Ceremonial Bowl,* 1990, stoneware, terra sigillata, pit-fired, 34⁴/₅"x 20". bottom left to right: Manuel Gomez—*Wooden Comb,* 1980s, ivory, pau wood, Brazilian rosewood, carved, 11"x 5¼"x 1¼"; Leo Twiggs—*We Have Known Rivers Series—Masks,* 1992, batik, 40"x 34½"x 1½"; Charnelle Holloway—*Tea Set,* 1986, nickel, sterling silver, teapot 9" high.


EXIT

TOWARD DEFINITION

An extraordinary gathering celebrates the contributions of African Americans to our nation's craft history.

The keynote address had been delivered that afternoon, the opening panel had convened and inspired. Still, true to the traditions of Africa's diaspora, the symposium "Toward Definition: An Examination of African American Craft Art" was not birthed—not sanctified—until the opening-night reception, when the *ase* (life energy) was summoned forth with cries, chants, drums, dance and libations.

The weekend's nearly 200 participants—artists, students, scholars, educators, museum and gallery administrators—had been transported in three buses from their hotel outpost in Dayton, Ohio, to the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce. At the museum awaited one cause for celebration: the exhibition "Uncommon Beauty in Common Objects: The Legacy of African American Craft Art," the first collection of craft art by African Americans to tour the nation [see page 44]. The weekend symposium, touring exhibit and related artist-in-residence program were organized by the museum (under the leadership of its director, John Fleming) in collaboration with a committee of craft artists and art historians. Sponsorship was provided by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

In the Presence of the Ancestors

It was clear on that Friday evening last November that those present were not mere spectators, but individuals who embraced their heritage, luxuriated in the mixing of mediums. T-shirts, blue jeans and Air Jordans mingled freely with exultant beadwork, ebony and pearls. Mud cloth decorated denim jackets; Kente cloth beautified baseball caps, as well as traditional head wraps and robes. Few seemed to escape the joy at this occasion. Even if only familiar with a person's work, the artists greeted one another as family or old friends.

ABOVE: **Quiltmaker Sandra German, John Fleming, director of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, quiltmaker Carolyn Mazloomi, and ceramist Bing Davis (left to right).** BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: **Andrew Scott and Gilda Edwards admiring Cheryl Riley's *Bakuba Griffin Table;* David MacDonald (left) working with a student to throw a pot.**

An explosion of drums followed the welcoming cry of William Bowman, the gathering's chief musician and priest, calling all to assembly. Flanked by two other musicians, Bowman lent his hands to the blur and thunder of an African drum ritual. "We approach this art of ours for its healing aspects," Bowman told the audience. "We will try to create the sounds that we have at home, in West Africa. Of course there we would not be surrounded by concrete, but the spirit is here."

Indeed, the musicians' first presentation left the museum's vast anteroom in a state of tranquillity. The cement walls seemed to dissolve, giving entree to the quiet Ohio woods. During the second composition, several members of the audience abandoned their chairs, accepting the musicians' invitation to dance. One by one they entered the invisible circle that separated performers from listeners, paused and waited for the drums' power to possess them. Then—arms extended, feet enflamed—each flew into the presence of the ancestors.

Documenting a Legacy

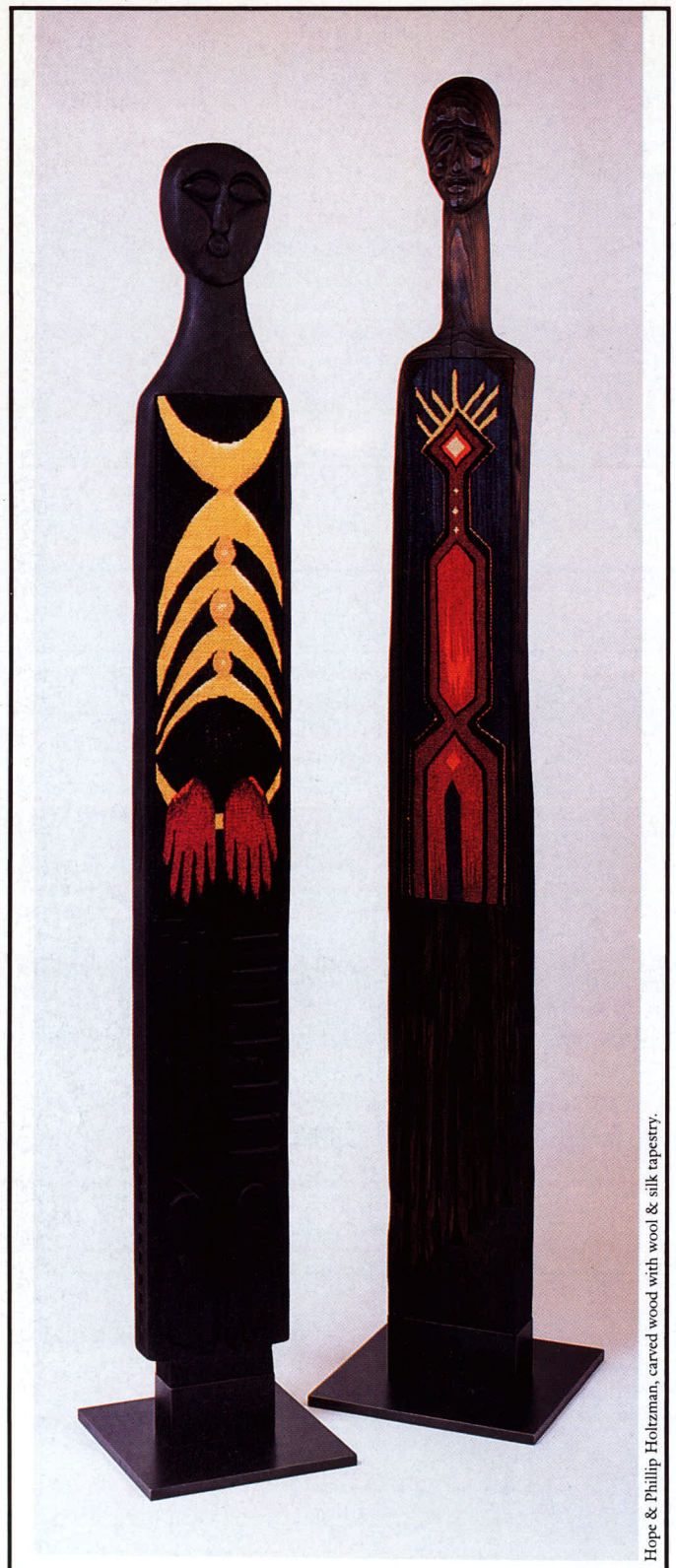
A fusion of many elements—history, design, technique, politics, economics, collective memory and vision—provided this symposium with its single cornerstone. The participating artists—ceramists, fiber artists and workers in beads, glass, metal and wood—represented a full spectrum of the craft world. Together, their unique and practical concerns often gave way to common ground: Africa and its pervasive influence upon antebellum and post-emancipation craft work, as well as the experiences shared by African American artists today.

As America's mainstream craft community establishes a new position within the art world, African American craft artists are aware that their responsibilities have become even more profound. To be denied their integral position in the American craft movement and its documentation would both undermine their potential influence and betray their legacy of craftsmanship.

This legacy, it was observed, is rich and extensive. The conference highlighted such examples as the woven baskets of the Sea Islands; slave quilts (some displaying family trees, others encoding the routes to freedom); the architectural structures of countless plantations; the 1820s furniture businesses of Henry Boyd in Cincinnati and Thomas Day in North Carolina; the silversmithing of a Louisiana man named Jacoba and the goldsmithing of John Frances in Pennsylvania; and the wrought iron gates, grilles and railings made by African blacksmiths—both enslaved and free—which frequently incorporated (or "masked") tribal symbols of resistance. Every speaker realized and asserted that for the sake of past and future, it is imperative that African American craft artists at last be both seen and heard.

To Speak through Art

Murry Norman DePillars, dean of Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts, threw down the gauntlet in his keynote address. "To a large extent, black artists have been entrapped in the Renaissance dichotomy and supplicants to the prevailing whims of America's cultural enterprise," DePillars said. "Since America's ethic of racial inclusion has proven to be impractical, black people, as well as black artists, must seek alternatives. These alternatives are based on human dignity, cultural independence and structural change that results in human dignity and healthy black institutions. The economic power of black people is a non-negotiable imperative in this structural reordering of



Hope & Phillip Holtzman, carved wood with wool & silk tapestry.

THE HOLTZMAN COLLECTION

112A Camino de la Placita, Taos, NM 87571
505-751-0816

WORTH gallery

America and its institutions."

Concern with the exclusion of African Americans from the documentations of American craft history was a theme echoed by others throughout the weekend. Moreover, given the grass roots nature of the craft movement, the impact of this omission extends beyond the typical power struggles of cultural elitism and political racism. The vitality of the movement is engendered not only by each ethnic group's participation, but by the independence of each group's expressions.

Ampofo-Anti with his ceramic sculpture *Mampong Parginong.*

"Being in the spirit is not necessarily being in the passive or plausible reality," explained Nkiru Nzegwu, professor of philosophy and art history at the State University of New York at Binghamton, during the opening panel, "The Defining Characteristics of African American Craft Art." "Instead it talks about how we understand ourselves, and how in understanding ourselves we position our objects or creations to stand for us. It is at that point that I see most of the works of the artists and sculptors charting the direction—defining the world, picking up on the main concepts that are important to human life through their work, and using the work to speak for the larger community."

The Power of Personal Vision

The guest curator of the "Uncommon Beauty" exhibit, ceramist Willis "Bing" Davis, concurred. "I have gone to many craft exhibitions, fairs and sales, and I have seen the marketplace sort of dictating what was in that year," Davis observed. "I have seen craftsmen making changes and jumping through hoops because they were concerned about being accepted.

"I've often felt and said that as a result of the difficulty of surviving in this society, the African American craftsman, and African American artists in general, have indirectly received a special ability. Because doors were closed and opportunities often were not presented, because the broader community did not embrace, nurture, preserve and reward, these craftsmen often went ahead and did what they felt they should do. As a result, their integrity came forth, and it is that integrity that gives their pieces their uniqueness, their life force. I believe that eventually those individuals whose contributions are acknowledged will be those who insisted on maintaining their own personal vision."

Symbols and Survival

Artistic symbols and artists' survival were the subjects examined at the Saturday morning panels. In one room, fiber sculptors Marcella Welch and Xenobia Bailey, leather artist Marvin Sin and enamelist Napoleon Jones-Henderson led a discussion entitled "Economic Issues for Artists" (or as Jones-Henderson put it, "a blueprint for bringing the cottage craft out of the college craft and into the corporate world"). To inspire consumers to embrace craft as a viable part of their daily lives, Bailey presented plans for a model home using African-influenced objects, shapes and motifs. Jones-Henderson discussed the public art commissions he has received and the principles at play in their actualization. Sin, who "tried five years to get into the ACC shows," talked about the issues of salesmanship and creating work that is both honest and marketable.

Leslie King Hammond, director of graduate studies at the Maryland Institute, College of Art, moderated the discussion of "Africanisms and African Retentions" in an adjoining conference room. Howard

University's art department chair, Floyd Coleman, shared insights into recent craft scholarship and the challenges awaiting African American art historians. Frank Cummings explored African symbols and retentions in his own turned and carved wood vessels, and in the creations of an Asante family. Bamidele Demerson, curator of the African American Cultural and Historical Museum of Washtenaw County in Ann Arbor, Michigan, discussed the influence of African folklore and spirituality apparent in the ceramic work of Bing Davis and the fiber creations of Betty Leacraft.

Rosalind Jeffries, an art historian and instructor at City College of New York, focused on historical African American quilts and the need to examine such early works carefully to identify Africanisms. Ceramist Yvonne Tucker described the creative partnership she had shared with her late husband, Curtis Tucker, and how their increased awareness of

Selwyn Garraway of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund (left) and blacksmith Philip Simmons.

Africanisms transformed their pottery into spirit vessels.

At that morning's third panel, "Exhibiting African American Craft Art," moderated by Francis Equaroje, curator of the African Heritage Center at North Carolina's AT&T State University, the participants—Nannette Acker Clark, director of Philadelphia's Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, enamelist Angela Franklin, Kenneth Young of the Smithsonian Institution and Barry Gaither, director and curator of Boston's Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists—presented insights into the display of craft and how artists can work more successfully with museum and gallery professionals.

Ingenuity Against the Odds

"Sometimes they put a hump in your back and you don't straighten up 'til you get down the road," quipped Philip Simmons, an 82-year-old blacksmith, in the luncheon address. Resilience, determination and professionalism were the keys that the Charleston, South Carolina, resident urged his fellow artisans to retain as he conducted a slide presentation/tour of his astonishing creations.

With easygoing alacrity Simmons described the early crisis which led to the discovery of his artistry. "When I was working in the blacksmith's shop, people would come by whenever anybody bought a car," he recalled. "'Blacksmithing is a lost art, what are you going to do?' they would say to me. I talked to the man who had trained me, and he said, 'Just keep your head, there will always be something for a good blacksmith to do.'

"I kept hearing the words 'lost art,' and thinking about my stomach. But let me show you what happened after the horses left. . . ." The slide projection of a horse and buggy was replaced with one of an elaborate wrought iron gate. The audience cheered, sighed, applauded—all were hoping for a happy ending.

"I used the same hammer and the same coal," Simmons reported proudly, "but I had to get out and use my mind and my imagination to create a job of my own." Later, when the demand for gates declined, he employed the same ingenuity and expanded into the realm of deluxe burglar bars. Were there problems along the way? Sure, Simmons admitted, but he attributed his continued success to a simple axiom. "The customer is boss," he stated several times during his presentation, lest anyone forget.

Necklace. 22 karat gold with granulation, diamonds and rubies.

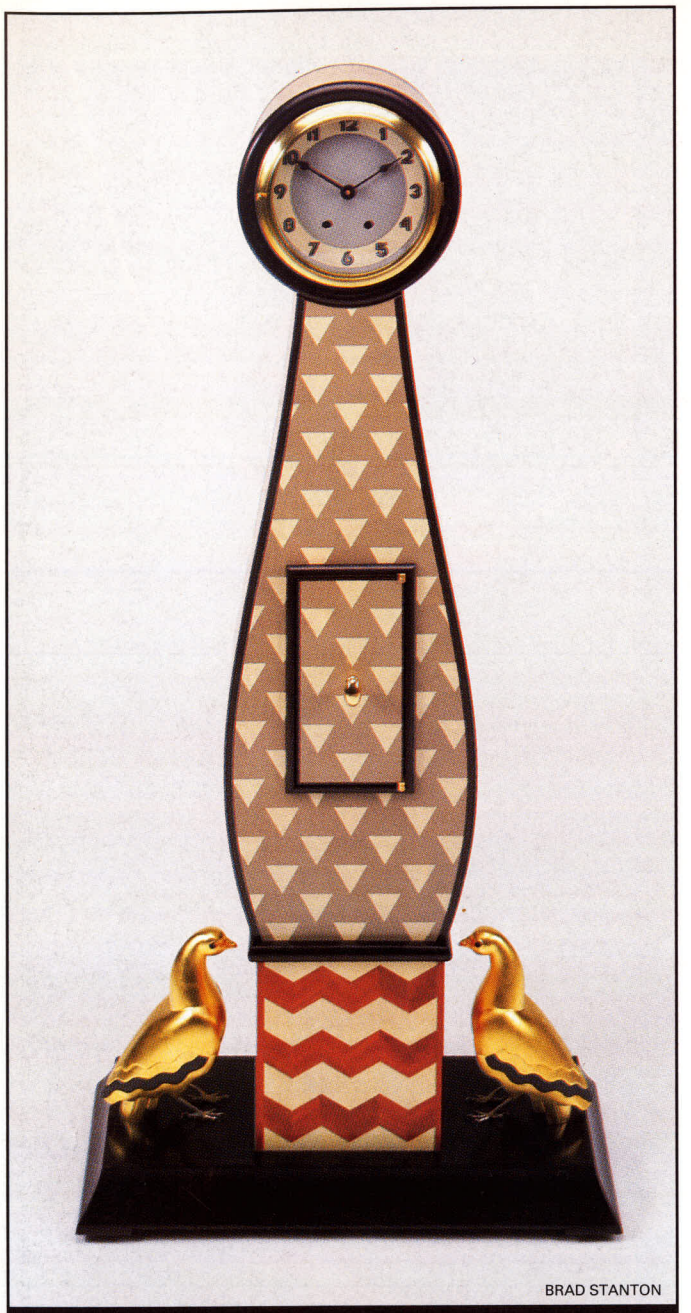
CORNELIA ROETHEL

Y A W
GALLERY

550 North Woodward Avenue
Birmingham, Michigan 48009
810/647-5470

STUART GOLDER

Bracelet. 18 karat and 14 karat colored woven gold.



BRAD STANTON

10 ARTISTS TELL TIME
DAVID CRAMER

"GRANDDAUGHTER" CLOCK, HAREWOOD, HOLLY AND PINK IVORY, EBONIZED MAHOGANY AND GOLD LEAF
49"H X 23 1/2"W X10'D.

APRIL 9 TO MAY 21, 1994

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The Case for a Multiethnic History

The artist demonstrations following the luncheon had many racing from the hotel's basement, where David MacDonald threw a pot while quietly captivating observers with his story of survival, to a first-floor conference room in which Joyce Scott mesmerized those present with her humor and improvisational beadwork, to an upstairs balcony upon which metalsmith John P. Beckley amazed onlookers by casting a bronze mask using the lost-wax process and his own inventive setup: an electric furnace and a five-gallon paint bucket. "I simply made a coffeepot that melts bronze," Beckley explained.

Five concurrent sessions followed: "Traditional Pottery in Ipetumodu" with ceramist Winnie Owens-Hart; "The Influence of Folk Art on Craft" with William Wiggins, Jr. of Indiana University's Folklore Institute and fiber artist Raymond Dobard; "African Craftsmanship and Historical African American Craft" with ceramist Ampofo-Anti; "Legal Issues for Craft Artists" with attorney Leonard DuBoff; and "Critical Analysis" with Nkiru Nzegwu and architect Richard Dozier.

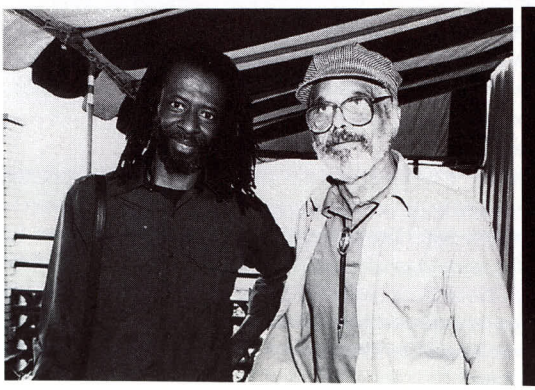
This last panel launched a heated debate after it was mentioned that the American Craft Museum intends to document craft in the 20th century and is seeking multiethnic participation. Some artists insisted that this time frame ignores the early contributions and influence of African Americans on the nation's craftsmanship, and further, that the themes explored will deliberately ignore the restraints placed on black artisans by the legal and apprenticeship systems. An American Craft Museum curator, April Kingsley, took center stage to persuade those present of the museum's good intentions. She was unsuccessful.

Unexpectedly, the Craft Museum's project had touched the conference's central nerve: the necessity for multiethnic representation at the inception, and in the research and decision making that leads to presentations of the nation's craft art. Defining American craft art without such input, it was reiterated, sorely limits the examination of craft expressions to those achievements recognized by the mainstream, thereby cheating the entire field of its exciting scope and potential.

"If we are going to connect with the established crafts community, then that community is going to have to acknowledge and respect us as a community, as a creative tradition," said Marvin Sin. "Without that, they will miss all that this represents—the body of spirit and history that has the potential of revitalizing and energizing the development of craft in America."

'We Belong to Each Other'

Equally animated was the next morning's closing session. Many participants, until now in the background, expressed additional concern for the future of African American craft art—notably, the need to encourage greater student awareness and artist mentoring. As the moderators, led by John Fleming, took notes and responded to comments from the speakers, others present passed around their "Uncommon Beauty" exhibit catalogs with a deftness reminiscent of high school. What had started out that weekend as a memento of the artists featured in its pages had become a sort of yearbook, in which old and new friends



Leather artist Marvin Sin (left) and metalsmith John P. Beckley.

Rosalind Jeffries addresses the crowd as panelist Winnie Owens-Hart looks on.

were welcomed to jot down a few words of appreciation.

"Some new people coming in think that they're going to see some intellectuals and some nice little craftspeople get together," observed Rosalind Jeffries. "But some of us were 20 and 25 years old when we met, and now we're over 50. We have grown together. Each of us knows what the other thinks. As creative people we look through each other's eyes. Time has shown us that we belong to each other.

"I think that this is probably the same reality that existed during the era of slavery. People knew that the potter was over here, the seamstress and the blacksmith over there, but nevertheless, some kind of communication took place. That in essence became the Underground Railroad. What we're seeing here today is our Overground Railroad."

—SHARON FITZGERALD

Sharon Fitzgerald, a free-lance writer based in New York City, has contributed to American Visions, Essence *and other magazines. A selection of lectures delivered at the symposium "Toward Definition: An Examination of African American Craft Art" have been published in the January/February 1994 issue of* The International Review of African American Art, *available for $12 from the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, which also offers related videos, slides and teaching kits. To order, call 1-800-BLKHIST.*

CERF Seeks Aid for Quake Victims

The past year has been challenging, to say the least, for the Craft Emergency Relief Fund. In the wake of Hurricane Andrew, the Midwest floods and the Los Angeles fires, CERF is now responding to the L. A. earthquake, which claimed the studios, equipment and inventory of significant numbers of craftspeople.

"Our first priority is to find ways for them to start working again," says Lois Ahrens, director of the nonprofit fund, a source of low-interest loans for those whose ability to earn a living has been hampered by accident, illness or other emergency. She reports that the craft field's response to this latest natural disaster has been heartening, with fair promoters waiving booth fees for quake victims and suppliers offering equipment discounts. Still, its resources strained, CERF continues to appeal for donations of cash or in-kind goods and services. "There's nothing we don't need," says Ahrens. Contact CERF, 245 Main St., Northampton, MA 01060, (413) 586-5898.

Vanessa Lynn Prize Deadline Approaches

June 5 is the deadline for submissions to the Vanessa Lynn Prize, a writing competition for a critical essay dealing with contemporary American craft. Created by a group of benefactors to honor the writer and critic who died in 1992, the prize consists of $3,000 and publication of the winning essay in AMERICAN CRAFT (see page 92 for details). Announcement of the award will be made by September 5.