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Trading Baskets For Plastics

By WILLIAM L. HAMILTON

"SAY Hello to Great Design" reads the sidewalk kiosk for an exhibition, "USDesign: 1975-2000," opening today at the Museum of Arts and Design at 40 West 53rd Street in Manhattan. The invitation is accompanied by a picture of a telephone designed by Michael Graves, the architect, for the Target chain.

The 46-year-old museum, established as the Museum of Contemporary Crafts and then for 23 years the American Craft Museum, renamed itself again in October. Addressing issues of financial health, attendance and aesthetic vision, the museum's director, Holly Hotchner, said of the new institution's intention, "It's about being a living museum of contemporary art, and wanting to go forward, and the excitement of what's happening today, which is no longer described by the former limiting term."

But many in the field of craft, from artists to collectors, are concerned that the conclusion of this friendly call to design will be "Goodbye to Craft." Karim Rashid's iconic polypropylene trash can, "Garbo," included in the new show, was not exactly thrown on a potter's wheel.

On the visitors' map, the only museum in New York dedicated to American craft has vanished, and with it, a highly visible defense of its singular idea -- a fusion of art and design that has developed, hand in glove, with human activity.

If the word "craft" is obstinately resistant to definition, the museum's new acronym, MAD, is descriptive of feelings raised by its removal. "It's a shame," said Sam Maloof, regarded as the dean of American studio furniture makers and who has created work for three presidents. "I've always felt 'craft' was a good, honest word. People say, 'You're an artist.' I say, 'No, I'm a woodworker.' "

Jack Lenor Larsen, the textile designer and a pre-eminent collector of crafts, has been on the museum's board of governors for 40 years. Of the administrative decision to present a major design show that excludes crafts, he said: "I told them they would be the eighth-most-important design museum in New York. I've never wanted to play games I couldn't win."

Ms. Hotchner and David Revere McFadden, chief curator, argued on Monday that the institution is not leaving the craft community homeless, but reflecting, and hoping to lead, the expanding direction of craft. The museum is also in the process of acquiring a new location, at 2 Columbus Circle, that would quadruple its gallery space.

"Craft is something different today," said Ms. Hotchner, sitting in her office with Mr. McFadden. Ms. Hotchner wore a rubber and silver brooch and a necklace that was a strand of Morse code, worked in metal, that quoted a Walt Whitman poem. "Let's make that as positive and upfront as possible," she said, and added: "We absolutely have left no one behind."

Ms. Hotchner and Mr. McFadden talked of the trend among craft artists like Jim Makins toward limited productions of what were traditionally one-of-a-kind pieces, and of the next generation, now in school, who are being educated in the processes of art and design as well as ceramics or glass.

"They don't call themselves craftsmen," Ms. Hotchner said. "I believe the craft movement -- the studio craft movement of the 1960's -- really doesn't exist anymore."

Garth Clark, a leading dealer in New York who represents artists working in craft media like ceramic and glass, put it more cynically. "The arts-and-crafts argument is over," he said. "Industry has won." Mr. Clark said that he thought the serious collecting market for craft was shrinking too. "It's steadily going out of business," he said. "The high end is merging into the fine arts, and the low end is serving craft fairs and shops."

But Mr. Clark took exception with the museum's decision to change its name. "They've chosen exactly the wrong moment to drop crafts," he said. "What it is, is a full-scale retreat."

At an auction on June 6 at Sotheby's in New York, which since 1992 has included craft in decorative arts sales under the category "contemporary works of art," craft items did not generally sell well. Pieces of glass by Dale Chihuly, a star, sold below their high estimates, which were in the tens of thousands of dollars, or didn't sell. A work by William Morris, an American artist whose ceramic urns were on view at the Museum of Arts and Design concurrently, also sold below its low estimate.

"After our last sale, I'm a little nervous" about the ability of even blue-chip crafts to drive prices, said Gregory Kuharic, Sotheby's vice president for 20th-century decorative arts. Mr. Kuharic said of the renaming of the American Craft Museum: "They've clouded their mission here. I know they're trying to widen their constituency, but they're alienating the core." Speaking of Sotheby's own creative titling, he conceded, "We've done everything we can to avoid calling it a craft sale, but there's no denying using that word."

Mr. Kuharic is also a potter. Though he expressed reservations about the immediate

future of craft in the art market, he said that he knew a lot of craftsmen who continue to make a living "by practicing what they love to do." He added: "It's a very active group. I don't think the moment is over."

Jane Adlin, an assistant curator in the department of modern art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, agreed. "It's very alive," said Ms. Adlin, who organized the "Clay Into Art" exhibition at the museum in 1999. "It's gotten bigger and more international."

Janice Blackburn, a London curator who has organized craft exhibitions for Sotheby's, concurred. "In England, there is very exciting new direction," she said, mentioning this year's nomination of Grayson Perry, who works with ceramic and embroidery, for the prestigious Turner Prize.

Craft artists themselves, like Michelle Holzapfel, a woodworker in Marlboro, Vt., who has exhibited at the American Craft Museum, say that the debate over names and definitions is vexing but irrelevant.

"They represent a narrow stratum of the craft community," Ms. Holzapfel said of the new Museum of Arts and Design. A better indication of what was happening nationally, she added, were the 11 regional shows sponsored each year by the American Craft Council in New York, of which the American Craft Museum was a part until 1990.

Paul Stankard in Mantua, N.J., who works with glass, says he thinks that the Museum of Arts and Design, in its latest incarnation, is right on the mark. Mr. Stankard is being considered for an exhibition there in 2004.

"The craft world is maturing into a design field," he said. Mr. Stankard said that at the Baltimore Winter Market, an American Craft Council event where 1,100 exhibit, he saw a return to functional objects and objects produced by hand, but in multiples. "The vast majority of makers are involved in design, as opposed to 'artists,'" he said.

Whether the craft movement is dying, alive or changed beyond recognition, two things seem indisputable: design sells, and craft is more misunderstood than ever.

Ms. Hotchner at the Museum of Arts and Design recalled the reaction of focus groups when the institution was renamed. "Most horrifying of all was trying out the word 'craft' - - we tested our own name," she said. "The response was unanimous. Not one single person had a positive response."

Indicative of the institution's frustration was the exhibition of quilts from Gee's Bend, Ala., at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which was reviewed as art and received 200,000 visitors. "The Gee's Bend show would have been perceived differently if it had been at the Craft Museum, not the Whitney," Ms. Hotchner said, defensively.

Like everything in the museum world -- and New York -- the decisions boiled down to money. "I can't tell you the number of foundations, corporations, that absolutely don't understand craft," Ms. Hotchner said. "They think it's potholders -- literally -- and they laugh when you go in." (Target, with J.P. Morgan Chase, is financing "USDesign: 1975-2000," which runs through Nov. 2. The show originated at the Denver Art Museum.)

Kenneth R. Trapp, curator in charge of the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, which exhibits craft, indicated that discomfort with the word "craft" could be a New York problem. "As a curator, I live in two worlds -- New York and the Dakotas," he said. "Culture does exist in places we don't find very attractive, and people everywhere have an innate desire to create."

Many call that craft.