

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2015 as the “International Year of Light and Light-based Technologies”. The International Year of Light website (www.light2015.org) says light “has revolutionized medicine, opened up international communication via the Internet, and continues to be central to linking cultural, economic and political aspects of the global society”. Light is also an integral part of the visual arts, and aspects of light will be featured in numerous exhibitions across the country and around the world.

According to the Chinese lunar calendar, the Year of the Sheep (goat or ram) begins February 19, 2015. It is thought that people born during this year are associated with the characteristics of being tender, polite, clever, and kind-hearted. They are also thought to have special sensitivity to art and beauty.

The Canadian Craft Federation has proclaimed 2015, “Craft Year”. The official “Craft Year” website (www.craftyear.ca) says it will be “A year-long, nation-wide festival aimed at promoting craft as a key player in Canadian Culture.” The Gallery will be taking part in Craft Year in various ways.

With all this going on in 2015 I am sure that at least one creative person somewhere, will combine all three of these 2015 themes into one amazing masterpiece. But then someone will ask the question: is it “art” or is it “craft”?

There wasn’t always a distinction between what many people now think of as “fine art” and “craft”; that distinction has only been around for the last 500 years or so, which isn’t long when one considers that humans have been making “artworks” for at least 25,000 years. Beginning in the late 1400s, or what is known as the “Renaissance” period in art history, this distinction emerged when some of the *maker* guilds specifically the painters and sculptors, distanced themselves from the other *maker* guilds, such as the potters, silversmiths, and glassblowers, etc. Prior to this time most *makers* were anonymous artisans; their artwork was more about who the artwork was for, the patron, then who created it. In 1550, Giorgio Vasari (1511-74), a painter and architect, published a book on the lives of his fellow Renaissance artists. Singling out specific artists for posterity and elevating them to “star” status. The difference can also be related to the patronage of the rich who could afford to have objects that had no function, other than something to look at. So by association, the makers of these non-functional objects felt that they were of a more elite class than the makers of functional objects. Some say that craft artists have had a chip on their shoulder ever since, creating their own hierarchy, by calling objects made by silversmiths, glassblowers, furniture makers and potters “fine craft” over other activities like needlepoint or crochet.

But even if you feel there is a difference between what is “art”, and is “craft”, it is only found within the European art tradition. Most First Nations, traditional African and Asian cultures don’t have this distinction. From the point of view of Art Collection Manager, categorizing some objects becomes complicated. When is a tea pot, not a tea pot, but a clay sculpture?

For the most part the traditional medieval artisan guilds have disappeared, and the line between what is “fine art” and “fine craft” has blurred in Western Culture, but the distinction between “art” or “craft” still remains. Why?

Some authorities say that “fine art” objects are just for looking at, and “craft” objects have a function other than aesthetics. Someone once told me that “if you are following someone else’s pattern you are doing a craft, and if you are following your own pattern then it is art”. There are many arguments bantered around, as to what the difference is between “art” and “craft”. There are no easy answers or definition. Many academics, critics and the “makers” themselves have argued about what is “art”, and what is “craft” ...and don’t get them started on what is macramé.

Is the person who makes these objects, a *craftsperson*, an *artist* or a *maker*? This has been a conundrum even for those working in the field, especially for those who use their traditional “craft” skills to create objects that are so embellished, altered or of such a scale that they could never be functional and are clearly for display purposes only. Is the *maker* of a meter tall wine goblet, the size of a birdbath, a potter or a clay artist? To complicate things further, some “makers” create objects that can be found at different points on the functional continuum at the same time in their creative practice, depending on whether they are making “production” items to sell to a wide audience or something more unique created for a specific collector or Gallery.

The Grey Bruce region has many people creating work in any number of media, making beautiful objects that may have a function, but which are also visually appealing. Many of these artists are featured in a new book available at the Gallery called ***backroad craft – FINE CRAFT IN GREY & BRUCE COUNTIES***. Several of these *makers* have been featured artists in solo or group exhibitions at the TOM and/or included in the Gallery’s Collection. Artwork created by these artists and many more can be found in the Gallery Shop, various Artist Co-ops and farmers’ markets in the region.

You will see and hear a great deal about “art” and especially “craft” in 2015 and that is wonderful. In my opinion whether you call it “art” or “craft”, it is just semantics. The point I want to make is that everyone should support and celebrate all of the passionate people (particularly those living in Grey Bruce) that have devoted their lives to creating thought-

provoking objects that make our everyday lives more interesting and our homes more beautiful.

David Huff

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Tom Thomson Art Gallery

Photo credit

Is it "Art" or is it "Craft"...selections from the Gallery's Collection (clockwise from the top left) Steve Irvine "Lidded Jar", Ian Forbes "Gold Fluted Bowl", Andrew Goss "Concrete Bangle", Tom Thomson "design pattern for crochet tablecloth", Audrey Armstrong "Jacket", Tom Thomson "Decorated Bowl", Mike MacDonald "Eastern Butterfly Quilt" and in the centre Ann Keeling "Bowl".