



A Creative Past and Present:

RIT's School for American Crafts is the oldest craft school in the nation and has a long history of artistic innovation. Today, SAC faculty and students are using this heritage as well as the latest technologies to develop new methods and means of artistic expression.

Blazing a Trail of Artistic Innovation

by Kevin Fuller

The School for American Crafts (SAC) at RIT is the oldest craft school in America and has long been one of the leading creative and educational forces in the Arts and Crafts Movement. Current SAC faculty Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez, Andy Buck, Jane Shellenbarger, and Robin Cass exemplify the school's dual mission to honor the American craft tradition, while also developing new and innovative methods for creating and presenting art.

The Past and the Present

SAC was originally founded at Dartmouth College and moved to RIT in 1950. In its 62-year history at RIT, the school has produced a host of students who have gone on to major careers in the field, while also being home to some of the nation's most prominent craft artists. Year after year, SAC has sought to promote traditional craft techniques, while also paving the way for current and future innovation in the arts.

"It's always been very important that our programs maintain

that traditional craft method," says Don Arday, the current chair of SAC. "At the same time, we seek new ways to enhance the creative process."

This includes study and artistic creation in ceramics, glass making, furniture design, contemporary jewelry design, and metal sculpture based on the fusion of craft making and fine arts that developed at places such as Germany's Bauhaus School in the 1920s.



Expressing Heritage and History in Art: Metals professor Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez produces a wide range of sculpture in steel, silver, and gold, from fine jewelry to large public art pieces. His work reflects his own background and culture, including historical motifs and forms inspired by his native Mexico.



Mother's Brooch by Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez: Sculpted jewelry featuring 22- and 18-karat gold, diamonds, and a South Sea pearl. It won a 2011 NICHE award for best gold jewelry.

In addition, current SAC faculty members are using modern techniques in material analysis, computer animation, and prototyping to develop new methods and means for expressing and producing craft art. In addition, they explore diverse topics such as history, politics, and science to better present their artistic themes. The school strives to transfer this creativity to its students through unique coursework and programming that balances the past, present, and future.

“Through our educational offerings and the creative work of our faculty and students, we seek to find new methods and means for expressing creativity,” Arday adds.

Expressing Heritage Through Sculpture

For longtime metals professor Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez, being a successful artist is a fusing of the past and the future. Born in Mexico City, Mexico, Caballero-Perez came to the United States in 1986. He

expresses that background in his art and in his course work.

“I like a lot of historical motifs,” says Caballero-Perez. “My own cultural heritage truly reflects in a lot of my work.”

That creative expression includes public art pieces for the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at RIT, the Pieters Family Life Center in Henrietta, and ArtWalk in downtown Rochester. In addition, he has created numerous acclaimed jewelry pieces, including “Mother’s Brooch,” which won a 2011 *NICHE Magazine* Award for best gold jewelry.

Caballero-Perez’s approach involves practical, hands-on research to get used to how a particular material works—be it steel, silver, gold, or some other medium. This includes the analysis of various material properties in order to better manipulate his chosen medium and ultimately translate his artistic expression into

finished sculpted pieces.

Caballero-Perez has also embraced technologies such as computer-aided design to enhance the prototyping and development of his pieces.

During the past two years, Caballero-Perez has attended numerous workshops and seminars on the use of computer technology in art creation, and has also incorporated these elements into his work as well as metals classes on campus.

“They are the ones who are going to really change the field,” says Caballero-Perez about his students. “They are the future of the industry.”

Despite all this innovation, Caballero-Perez still believes in the basics. He draws inspiration for his art from all manner of fields, from architecture to the natural world, and believes his work is rooted in the fundamentals of craft creation as much as the future.

“I live in the fundamentals,” he says with a smile. “I still like to draw.”



Storytelling Through Furniture Design: Andy Buck is interested in the many interpretations of artistic expression and its use in telling a story. He incorporates Polynesian, African, and American folk art and culture into a wide range of pieces, including tables, mirrors, and benches.

A Hand-Carved Narrative

In 1987, Andy Buck was a legislative aide to then-U.S. Rep. Leon Panetta, who is currently the Secretary of Defense for President Obama. Buck's days consisted of writing letters to constituents and researching legislation on behalf of the congressman.

That's when his life took a U-turn.

"After working on the Hill for a while," says Buck with a grin, "I decided to follow my heart and pursue a career designing furniture and making artwork." Having minored in furniture design at Virginia Commonwealth University, this was not as far-fetched as it might seem.

Buck is a storyteller with his hands. "I'm really fascinated by the narrative qualities associated with making objects by hand," he says.

Interested in the many interpretations of artistic expression, his work often

includes visual references to Polynesian, African, and American folk art. His wide range of furniture pieces has earned international acclaim and been exhibited at numerous galleries and museums, including the Fuller Craft Museum; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City.

At age 5, Buck's family moved to Switzerland where his father, a specialist in tropical medicine, began work with the World Health Organization. His father traveled the world, bringing back artifacts and many stories, stories of culture and of people.

"My father would come home with shields, masks—all sorts of interesting objects," he says. These artifacts from his childhood became original sources of inspiration many years later



Foyer Table by Andy Buck: The cherry and poplar piece was created for the 30th anniversary of the Pritam and Eames Gallery, a leading exponent of studio furniture.

as an artist. Buck explains his digging goes deeper than his past. Searching for new ways of working is at the heart of his research. The use of new technology is also an integral part of his work. Hand-carved parts are sometimes combined with laser-cut parts, laser-engraved text, and other computer-generated elements.

Research, innovation, and data collecting can be for the purpose of deconstruction, too, Buck explains. "I try to break down archetypes," he says. "I try to come up with ideas that are not so easily pegged."

It's that constant drive for innovation in his own work that he parallels in the classroom.

"In order to be an effective teacher, I must challenge myself with concept, material, and process, just as I try to challenge my students."



***Equilibrium* by Jane Shellenbarger:**

The soda-fired, black clay platter was inspired by the culture and history of Islam. It was featured as part of the group exhibition "Islamic Influence," presented by Florida's Crossroads Gallery.

Ceramics as Social Expression: Ceramicist Jane Shellenbarger incorporates historical references and social commentary into her functional pottery pieces. The goal is to create useful forms, while also expanding understanding of different cultures and societies.

Creative Expression in Ceramics

Jane Shellenbarger, professor of ceramics at SAC, focuses on pottery the idiom, incorporating historical references and social issues with domestic objects. Her work has been exhibited widely and is part of the permanent collection of the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art.

"While function continues to be an essential concern, I am most intrigued with the ability of pots to transcend themselves as objects and convey

information," says Shellenbarger.

Conveying information requires an intense regimen of constantly collecting data and research for both technical prowess and content. Shellenbarger focuses her research on utilitarian objects, while interjecting other aesthetic elements into the work. "There are so many ways you can think about your work fitting into society," she says.

Her art often becomes a document of history, while also bearing reference to painting, vessels, and even social content. "I like to explore both culture

and history through the pieces I create," she says.

Before coming to RIT, Shellenbarger was involved in a four-week artist residency at the International Ceramic Studio in Kecskemét, Hungary. She worked with master mold makers and absorbed the creative process of the European porcelain factory tradition which she then incorporated into her own work.

"Travel and cultural exchange is such an important aspect of what an artist does," Shellenbarger explains.

Her teaching is also an extension of her research.

"I try to get students to understand the value of research while building technical skill and immersing themselves in the information-gathering process," Shellenbarger adds. "I encourage students to build layers of information into their work."

She emphasizes to her students that the exchange of ideas is all part of growth as an artist. Whether it's conceptual growth or historical knowledge, it's all part of the craft.

"I look backward and forward at the same time," she says.



Combining Science and Art: Glass artist Robin Cass incorporates scientific forms and materials in her work, including fossils and molecular models, to illustrate how humans observe and understand the natural world.



Flagellated Galactolipid by Robin Cass: The blown and painted glass piece is part of Cass' Curious Growths series, tangled clusters of fleshy formations that evoke botanical or zoological specimens.

The Legacy of Frans Wildenhain

Ceramic artist Frans Wildenhain taught for 20 years at the School for American Crafts, earned a Guggenheim Fellowship, and produced a broad range of ceramic art.

His influence on the American craft movement is being celebrated through a major retrospective created by RIT professor Bruce Austin.

"Wildenhain was enormously significant in the development of modern ceramics, as an artist, an educator, and a partner in Shop One, one of the very first commercial craft businesses in the nation," notes Austin.

A public exhibit of approximately 150 examples of Wildenhain's mid-century modernist pottery and related artifacts will be held simultaneously at RIT's Bevier Gallery and Dyer Arts Center from Aug. 20 through Oct. 2, 2012.

Austin is also producing an exhibition catalogue comprised of color photographs of the objects on exhibit, Wildenhain's biography and scholarly essays on the mid-century studio ceramics movement, and a case study of marketing of crafts through Shop One. "The project illustrates and explains Wildenhain's role in transforming craft from a modestly scaled artistic effort into a mainstream interest," Austin adds.

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A hand-thrown stoneware vase with multicolored glaze, circa 1965, by RIT's School for American Craftsman founding faculty member Frans Wildenhain.

Two Worlds Come Together

Some artists draw from the most unlikely sources for inspiration. Glass professor Robin Cass often reaches from the science world for her art.

Cass comes from a science-oriented background, with doctors, pharmacists, and biologists throughout her family tree.

"Growing up in this environment instilled me with a fascination of the language and artifacts of the sciences," she says. "But I became more interested in their poetic rather than practical aspects."

For Cass, her love of glass as a material meshes perfectly with her interest in the sciences. "Glass has such a rich history as a material used in scientific research, from alchemical vessels to lenses, glass has had a profound effect on how we observe and understand the natural world."

Cass has explored all ends of the earth for interesting sources for her sculpture. During a sabbatical last year, Cass was a resident artist at the Osaka University of Art in Japan. While in Japan, she visited places like the Meguro Parasitological Museum and Tskiji fish market in Tokyo.

"I find the obscure scientific museums and urban food markets in other coun-

tries are often especially inspiring places."

Cass' unique creative style has earned her international acclaim and her work has been exhibited by a host of major arts centers, including the Museum of American Glass, the Tacoma Museum of Glass, and the Tittot Museum in Taipei, Taiwan.

Cass' creative process also relates to how she teaches. She constantly encourages her students to delve deeply into all subjects that pique their curiosity.

"I ask students to follow those tangents—read, collect images and materials. It's so important for artists to try and understand their interests on a deep level; it helps you make more nuanced and powerful work."

There has to be substance, she adds, and that's the basis of research in the arts. "Art about art is kind of a dead end."

A Center for Innovation in the Arts

The artistic and educational efforts of Caballero-Perez, Buck, Shellenbarger, and Cass exemplify the School for American Crafts' efforts to promote creative innovation and enhance education in the arts. It also highlights the school's mission to honor its past, while promoting new ways to create art in the 21st century. ■

Documenting the Culture of Mexico



Denis Defibaugh

The Festival of the Virgin of Candelaria is one of Mexico's largest religious and cultural events and has come to exemplify the celebration of life and family that are central themes in Mexican society.

Denis Defibaugh, professor of photography at RIT, has sought to document the celebration as a method for examining Mexican culture and its strong focus on religion, history, and heritage.

"The Candelaria Festival nominally celebrates the conversion of Mexico's indigenous population to Christianity in the early 16th century by the Virgin of Candelaria, a well-known prophet and Catholic saint," Defibaugh says. "However, today it has become a means for celebrating all manner of Mexican life, including the fusion of Spanish, African, and indigenous cultures as well as Mexican art, music, and fashion."

The festival begins in late January and runs through early February. Centered in the city of Tlacotalpan, in the state of Veracruz, it includes a religious procession to honor the Virgin, a

large music festival, bullfights, and a ceremonial running of the bulls.

"One part religious observance, one part cultural showcase, and one part massive party, the fest illustrates the fusing of different religions, civilizations, and cultures that make up modern Mexico," Defibaugh adds. "It is informative to see this fusion in practice through Candelaria, particularly when compared to the often-segregated cultural expressions seen in American society."

Defibaugh has traveled to the annual celebration on multiple occasions to photograph the festival and its participants. He has showcased the work in a number of exhibitions and is currently developing a book based on his photos with noted Mexican historian Ward Albro. Defibaugh has also made the photographs available to Candelaria organizers and participants as well as Mexican scholars.

The effort was funded by the Texas Council



Documenting the Culture of Mexico: Participants in the Candelaria festival prepare a doll for the Procession of the Virgin of Candelaria, one of the key religious observances of the fest.

for the Humanities and Innova Corp., and builds on Defibaugh's previous photo project designed to document Mexico's Day of the Dead festival.

"Through this project and my previous work in Mexico, I have tried to showcase the beauty and power of Mexican life and provide a deeper understanding of the breadth and depth of Mexican culture," Defibaugh says.

The Art and Engineering of Pop-Up Books



William Finewood

Pop-up books, which fuse three-dimensional shapes and movable components with traditional illustrations and narratives, are one of the most unique artistic forms. Combining elements of origami, paper engineering, and dimensional sculpture, the average pop-up book takes a year to design and every copy must be hand-assembled.

"The process is very much like a miniature engineering project," says Bill Finewood, associate professor in the School of Art. "Pop-ups come to life through movement and don't lock the viewer into a single moment frozen in time like a normal book does. It is an extremely unique experience for the reader, which is one of the forces that drive artists who work in the form."

Finewood has sought to promote pop-up artists and enhance education in the form, as well as develop his own artistic creations. This includes the development of *Pop-Up Books: An Interactive Exhibition*, which debuted at RIT's Bevier Gallery. The exhibit featured work from leading artists/authors in the field, including Chuck Fischer (*The White House*), David A. Carter (*Bugs in Space*) and Kyle Olmon (*Castle*). It also included a step-by-step display illustrating



A boy and his grandfather observe an eagle bringing food to its chicks in a scene from *A Cavu Day*, a pop-up book being created by RIT professor William Finewood.

the many components required to transform 2-dimensional designs into a finished 3-D book.

"Pop-up artists rarely get the respect they deserve for the work they create," Finewood notes. "Through this exhibit we were able to promote the work of a number of artist/authors and highlight both the technical innovation and artistry inherent in their work."

Finewood has also created a course at RIT

focused on pop-up art, as well as community presentations highlighting pop-up design. He is currently working on his own pop-up book, tentatively titled *A Cavu Day*, which he hopes to release in 2013.

"Through all of these efforts I hope to promote the continued development and enjoyment of pop-up books as a unique creative outlet," Finewood adds.