

## Wisconsin Designer Crafts Council - A Rich History

The Wisconsin Designer Crafts Council was established in 1916 under the name of the Wisconsin Society of Applied Arts (1916-1936). It was in 1937 that the society adopted the title Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen, and in 1982 became the Wisconsin Designer Crafts Council.



The objectives of this statewide organization were to keep artists informed about the national crafts scene, to provide a vehicle for exhibiting and marketing their work, and to hold meetings with educational components. According to a Milwaukee Sentinel article (September 1916), “New Art Society Is Launched Here,” the objectives of the group were “to promote fellowship among the designer craftsmen of Wisconsin; to raise the standards of beauty into objects in common use; to encourage designer and worker into a mutual relationship; and to further and support all branches of applied arts produced in the state.”

The Milwaukee Art Institute was the home of the new society and the first annual exhibit was held from November 21-December 11, 1916. Annual shows continued there until 1957, and then were moved to the Milwaukee Art Center until 1974. During this time, annual exhibits also traveled throughout the state.

In the early years, the range of craft work included metal, textiles, basketry, bookbinding, leather, pottery, porcelain, stained glass, illumination and book plates, designs for costumes, floor and wall coverings, architecture, and landscape gardening. Annual exhibitions became a major vehicle for artists to have their work seen by their peers and to be reviewed by prestigious jurors. Opening receptions were outstanding social events that attracted large audiences.

In 1961, the annual exhibit was selected by the Smithsonian Institution as a touring exhibition. In 1962, David Campbell, President of the American Crafts Council and Director of the Museum of Contemporary Craft, New York City, juried the annual show. He commented that the work of Wisconsin craftsmen rated well above average in the national picture. In 1965, the largest WDC craft show held at the Milwaukee Art Center consisted of 354 works by 149 artists.



As the growing collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum created more demands for exhibition space, new spaces were sought. Since 1974, the annual exhibitions have been held at prestigious museums and galleries throughout the state.

WDCC has made significant contributions to the development of 20th century American crafts. Numerous Wisconsin craft artists who were affiliated with the organization in its developing years and up through present day have become nationally known. Today, members continue to enjoy the opportunities and support that WDCC provides. Media represented include ceramics, fiber, enamel, glass, jewelry, leather, metal, photography, wood, sculpture, handmade paper, and mixed media. The biennial exhibition continues, along with a variety of other special events held during the year, including the Morning Glory Fine Craft Fair, Gallery Nights, the new MKE Fine Craft Studio Tour and workshops and seminars to keep members abreast of developing craft trends and connected to their colleagues. An enthusiastic Board of Directors meets bi-monthly to carry on this important legacy of maintaining excellence in fine craft work. WDCC raises public awareness and knowledge of Wisconsin's strong crafts tradition by making accessible the best in contemporary and traditional crafts, and by educating the public to the value of crafts in today's society.

