

Term

limits

investigates the words commonly used to describe art and culture. Although art terms may seem culturally neutral, invariably they imply hierarchies that validate one set of artistic assumptions and denigrate others.

The labels in this exhibition suggest aesthetic concepts that may be appropriate to each work of art. These descriptive terms are organized according to conventional attitudes that rank "fine art" as the most important, and "kitsch" as the least important. These definitions also reflect dichotomies between functional and nonfunctional, hand-made and machine-made, and sacred and secular objects.

Term Limits investigates the following terms and concepts:

Fine Art: an aesthetic, nonfunctional, object
Fine Craft: an art object that looks functional but isn't
Native Art: objects related to native cultures and rituals
Folk Art: objects based on traditional forms and ideas
Naïve Art: art produced by an untrained artist

Design: the arrangement of components to produce an artistic whole

Craft: a functional, useful, well-fabricated object
Artifact: any cultural object that implies age or antiquity

Popular Culture: mass forms of cultural communication
Kitsch: gaudy, pretentious imagery of everyday life

Functional: useful, practical, beneficial
Nonfunctional: created without regard to utility or practicality

Hand-made: requiring manual skills to produce
Machine-made: fabricated or finished by machine

Sacred: divine, exalted, holy, spiritual
Secular: carnal, earthy, profane, worldly

There are no right or wrong ways to define works of art; often multiple definitions may be appropriate. The Museum of Fine Arts encourages dialog and debate to help viewers recognize how terms can limit and expand their understanding of art and culture.

Joseph Traugott
 Curator of Twentieth-Century Art

Generously supported by grants from the Burnett Foundation, the Museum of New Mexico Foundation, and Charlotte Jackson Fine Art

Is It Art? Or Craft? Or What?

Contemporary art often defies easy definition and transcends simple categorization. In the 1950s, artists such as Peter Voulkos challenged commonly held assumptions about distinctions between art and craft, and functional and nonfunctional ceramic objects. His challenge coalesced in a concept of "fine craft": Art objects that looked like they could be used but that probably never would be.

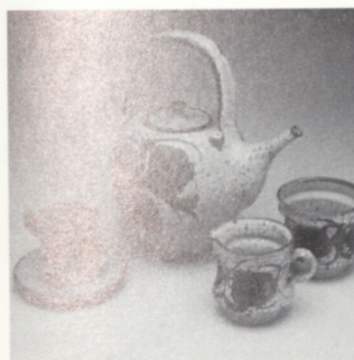


Peter Voulkos (b. 1924)

Tea Set ca. 1955

glazed ceramic, gift of Elizabeth F. and William C. Overstreet in memory of MacArthur and Alice H. Armstrong, Museum of Fine Arts 1996.30.1

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|--------------|-------------------|
| ✓ Fine Art | ✓ Design |
| ✓ Fine Craft | ✓ Craft |
| ✓ Native Art | ✓ Artifact |
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| ✓ Functional | ✓ Nonfunctional |
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| ✓ Hand-made | ✓ Machine-made |



Carol Sarkisian (b. 1938)

Maurice's Boots, Galisteo, NM 1988

beads on mixed media, collection of Barbara and Michael Ogg

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|--------------|-------------------|
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We all know what we consider to be art but often have difficulty defining exactly what that means. Similar objects, like pairs of shoes, are often called by a variety of terms: artifacts, craft, fine art, kitsch, Native art, sacred objects, and secular designs. Conventional thinking often elevates hand-made objects and diminishes machine-made ones.

Sometimes hand-made objects are not art but kitsch; and sometimes machine-made objects become sacred through specialized use. Frequently, connotations of art terms are more important than their denoted meanings. The simplest works, such as this fragment of a prehistoric Anasazi yucca sandal, can be compellingly beautiful.

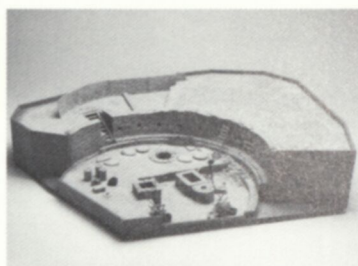
Process or Product

The terms defining art tend to emphasize the final product, and not the process of production. Artists often make preliminary works of art as part of the process of creating the works for which they are known. Usually these preliminary pieces are described in terms that help viewers dismiss these interesting objects.

Patrick Nagatani's sculptures document imagined excavations of Ryoishi, a late twentieth-century Japanese archaeologist who traveled the world, following the activities of a cult that buried automobiles at important spiritual sites. This work is about a BMW being excavated from the great kiva at Chetro Ketl, Chaco Canyon. Is Nagatani a sculptor, or is he a photographer?

Patrick Nagatani (b. 1945)
BMW, Chetro Ketl Kiva, Chaco Canyon, NM, USA 1997/98
Iris print, courtesy of Andrew Smith Gallery

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Patrick Nagatani (b. 1945)
BMW, Chetro Ketl Kiva, Chaco Canyon, NM, USA 1997
mixed-media maquette, collection of the artist

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From the Same Hands . . . Sometimes It's Art, Sometimes Not

Many New Mexico artists make several kinds of objects, but each becomes known for works that fit neatly into well-defined art categories. However, other objects made by the same hands may be dismissed when they do not fit into "art" categories. These pairs of objects investigate how cultural attitudes underpinning art terms condition aesthetic responses.

For ten years William Metcalf was building an airplane in his garage. As it became clear that the plane would never be finished, this project metamorphosed from functional design to nonfunctional sculpture. In its new form, the plane comments provocatively on flying, technology, and, of course, unfinished adult male projects. Metcalf is best known for his monochromatic paintings that exude a haunting spirituality.

William Metcalf (b. 1945)
Z-Max 1990–2000
mixed media, collection of the artist

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Thomas Barrow began making sculptures out of photographs fifteen years ago. His 3-D imagery has developed into a bricolage of images and things cemented together with tar and caulking. The cheap materials, found objects, and instant photographic images in this sculpture play against the use of permanent materials by other photographers. Barrow's sculptural commentary on modern life serves as a popular culture shrine to fleeting imagery, the impermanence of our times, and a reverie for the photographic past when craftsmanship mattered.



Thomas Barrow (b. 1938)
End of Photography 1993–94
mixed media, courtesy of Andrew Smith Gallery

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From One Context to Another

For centuries, artists in New Mexico have borrowed ideas, images, and techniques from each other, often across wide cultural divides. These appropriations and the resulting visual transformations combine cultural outlooks and aesthetic concepts. The contradictory terms used to describe the outcome of this process reflect the complexity of cultural interaction in New Mexico.

Chipped stone artifacts have fascinated Dave Chavarria since he was a boy growing up at Santa Clara Pueblo. Six years ago he gave up golf and began making chipped-stone works of art. Chavarria considers his chipped stone objects to be works of art that integrate the natural beauty of agate and obsidian with his skills manipulating material. While these small sculptures reference the forms of historical Native American tools, the artist makes them with a combination of traditional and nontraditional methods. These blades could be used as tools, but Chavarria intends them to be seen as beautiful objects and appreciated as nonfunctional works of art.

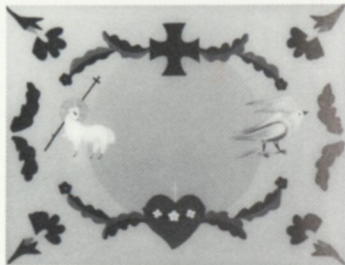


Dave Chavarria (b. 1945)

Wide Blade 1999

yellow jasper, collection of the artist

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Rebecca Salsbury Strand James

(1891–1968)

Divine Lamb and Taos Blue Sky

no date, reverse painting on glass, Museum purchase, Museum of Fine Arts 1998.35.2

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Rebecca Salsbury Strand James is well-known for her use of the folk art techniques of reverse-painting on glass and colcha embroidery to express her interest in the religious icons of Northern New Mexico. Occasionally, as in this case, she interprets a single idea in reverse-painting on glass and in hand-dyed wool embroidery. James simultaneously addresses fine art, folk art, craft, and popular culture issues with her images. Is there a single term that best describes her intriguing images?

The Art of Compulsive Behavior

Compulsive dedication to the production of a work of art often translates into the affective presence of an object. While this concept is usually applied to the work of untrained, visionary artists, it also pertains to contemporary artists. This kind of focused attention to subject matter, or mode of production, serves as a kind of personal meditation on a conceptual ideal.

James Parker designs kinetic sculptures that embody velocity, directness, and function. His simplified forms and inventive relationships between components have everything to do with his dedication to speed. To achieve this goal, every extra gram of material has been machined away. The resulting vehicle weighs fewer than 200 pounds and has been clocked at nearly 150 miles per hour. This sculpture comments succinctly on a universal value of contemporary life: how fast can we go?

James Parker (b. 1946)

Ratz (250 cc racing motorcycle) 1995 mixed media, collection of the artist

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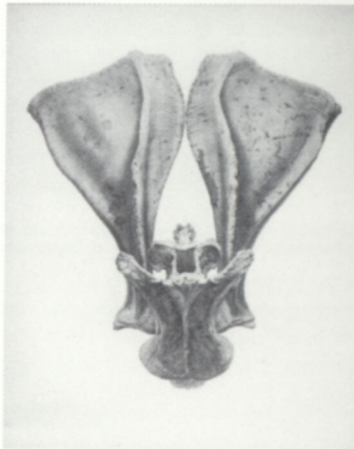
Gendron Jenson (b. 1939)

Ciervo Angélico Hommage to

Federico García Lorca 1988

graphite pencil on paper, Museum purchase, through gifts from Jim and Jeanne Manning, and Tim and Ingmarie McElvain, Museum of Fine Arts 1999.9.1

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Is It Art or Architecture?

Traditionally, distinctions have been drawn between art and architecture. Contemporary artists often contradict the terminology constructing such artificial boundaries. Artists such as Beverley Magennis and Tony Evanko create live-in sculptures that defy the bounds of conventional categories and terminology.

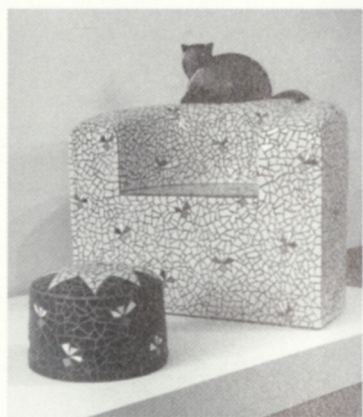
Beverley Magennis (b. 1942)

Patio Chair with Cat

1999

mixed media and ceramic tile, courtesy of The Munson Gallery

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Beverley Magennis (b. 1942)

Albuquerque Residence

1984–present

tile on mixed media, collection of the artist, photograph by Robert Reck

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