

Definitions for Traditional and Contemporary Craft

The following information is provided by Georgine Clarke and Joey Brackner of the Alabama State Council on the Arts (www.arts.alabama.gov). These definitions are provided for clarification and to inspire further research and discussion based upon the documentary “Alabama Craft: Tradition and Innovation” and its accompanying classroom materials.

Traditional Art

The terms “traditional” and “folk” may be used interchangeably to refer to those aspects of learned behavior (culture) that are transferred through word of mouth and/or by following an example set within a cultural group. Traditional art is learned from family or community members and is passed along through generations, with each artist remaining true to time-honored methods or techniques, yet free to add personal creativity to the process. Folk or traditional artists are highly trained, and it is the manner of their training that earns them the designation of “folk.”

Craft

An initial definition of “craft” means objects made for use, such as a cup for drinking or a chair for sitting. Before commercial manufacturing, these objects were made by hand, and the techniques for creating them were learned through family or community traditions, or occasionally through an apprenticeship program with master artisans. “Craft” also refers to the manual dexterity and artistic skill required in working with materials and in creating objects that can be ornamental, functional, or both.

Contemporary Craft

Because the exclusive need for functional handmade objects no longer exists, and because the learning of (craft) processes may take place outside community tradition, contemporary craft is marked by innovation in design and materials. Accepted as an important art form, contemporary craft is marked by new interpretations of traditional technique and style. Studio craft artists continue to make objects by hand, beautiful pieces that can be utilitarian and are frequently sold in galleries and at art fairs. These individuals have generally learned their skills in more formal educational settings – including studying, researching, and experimenting. Some colleges and universities provide instruction in contemporary craft as a part of a broader fine arts curriculum. Specialized schools, such as Arrowmont in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and Penland in North Carolina, provide unique opportunities for learning craft processes.