



OPPOSITE
SHEZAD DAWOOD
 Installation detail, *Between Land & Sea*, 2021
 Photo by PADDY BARRY

Words by KEE FOONG

The Art of Craft

Long dismissed as fine art's poor cousin, craft is coming in from the cold, with a dazzling array of global museums and galleries now showcasing the best of it. Here's an inspirational handful to visit

Across time and continents, humans have been fascinated by finely crafted objects. Armies have plundered for it, vaults been built to store it. Nonetheless, craft occupies an awkward place in the art world establishment, having long been looked down on as the domain of artisans, women and indigenous peoples. But with renewed appreciation for the handmade, and greater awareness of institutional racism and sexism, the distinction is blurring. To get a sense of craft's many guises, take a tour of museums and galleries around the globe, from big guns to independent operations.

Start at Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, a must-see should you find yourself in the Austrian capital, and worth a detour if you're not. Most visitors head straight up to the first floor for its outstanding collection of European masters, which includes numerous Brueghels, two of the remaining (and astonishing) *Four Seasons* by Arcimboldo, and Vermeer's celebrated *The Art of Painting*. Just off the main entrance, however, is the less-trodden *Kunstammer* – a 20-gallery, 2,200-piece-strong cabinet

of wonders amassed by the once omnipotent Habsburgs before their empire collapsed in the early 20th century. Within this fantastical annexe stands vitrine after gleaming vitrine of glittering objects from the Middle Ages to the baroque period – golden bowls, silver platters, cups made of ostrich eggs, ship-shaped automaton... The list goes on.

Taking pride of place is the *Saliera*, a 500-year-old salt-and-pepper holder crafted by goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini for French King Francis I. The reclining figures of the god of the sea, Neptune, and goddess of the earth, Tellus, shine so bright, it's no surprise royals and popes were smitten by it, as was a certain thief, who stole it in 2003 and buried it in a forest, before turning himself in several years later.

Also in the collection are a towering crystal pyramid vase by renowned jeweller Dionysio Miseroni and a lapis lazuli bowl studded with precious stones by another Miseroni. These and other artisanal treasures in the *Kunstammer* could be deemed craft, and once were by the museum, which housed them within its

Collection of Sculpture, Arts and Crafts, until deciding that they were too precious for such a prosaic department and, in 1990, giving the collection its current name.

Tim Rodgers, who is the Nanette L Laitman director at New York's Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), says that "long-standing aesthetic hierarchies have excluded objects or ways of making associated with utility, the decorative arts, the handmade, everyday life, folk culture, women's domestic labour and queer culture." This caused mediums and techniques such as pottery, weaving, embroidery and glass blowing to be "regularly dismissed as a lesser form of creative endeavour".

Rodgers believes that perceptions of craft are changing, however, with rigid academic thinking in art museums breaking down. "They are examining collections freighted with centuries of painting and sculpture created largely by white men and seeking new ways to include more women, people of colour and forms of art making that represent a more inclusive view of what fine art is, how it is made and who makes it." ▶▶



LEFT
**INSTALLATION VIEW, GARMENTING:
 COSTUME AS CONTEMPORARY ART**
 Museum of Arts and Design, New York, 2022

Photo by JENNA BASCOM

RIGHT
ANTI-SLAVERY MEDALLION
 V&A Wedgwood Collection

Although MAD, located in a 5,000sq m glazed terracotta-tiled and fritted glass building opposite Central Park, dropped “craft” from its name in 2002, it remains dedicated to innovation in craft, art, design and making. Its 2022 line-up includes a show that pushes the boundaries of floral and botanical arrangements; an exhibition by furniture sculptor Chris Schanck, who works with other artists, students and Bangladeshi craftspeople; and Queer Maximalism x Machine Dazzle, which highlights the outrageous creations of cabaret, drag and theatre costume designer Matthew Flower. It’s a roster that “builds on MAD’s history of highlighting creators who are redefining what art can do and be, and challenges preconceptions of what makes an object ‘museum-worthy,’” says Rodgers.

Dwarfing MAD is London’s V&A, the world’s largest museum of applied and decorative arts. Although craft isn’t mentioned in its mission statement, artisanal and handmade items are central to its permanent collection of more than 2.3 million objects spanning 5,000 years. This includes a wealth of textiles, fashion, jewellery, furniture, metalwork, glass and ceramics that are “unrivalled anywhere in the world”.

Among them are exquisite pieces from Jingdezhen, China’s porcelain capital, ornate Iznik ceramics from Turkey and famed figurines by Germany’s Meissen. British ceramics are well represented, including the standalone V&A Wedgwood Collection at Barlaston, Stoke-on-Trent. A highlight here is the iconic anti-slavery medallion produced in the 18th century by this venerable manufacturer, with an updated narrative to better reflect current debates around race and equality.

Smaller organisations are also reframing the narrative around craft. Hong Kong’s contemporary art centre Para Site held a major exhibition that travelled to Bangladesh, Myanmar, Poland, Norway and Thailand. Titled *A beast, a god, and a line*, it explores ideas of human connection and movement across the Asia-Pacific region, with textiles underpinning the architecture and storyline. Another recent show, *Koloa: Women, Art and Technology*, focused on customary women’s arts in Tonga. Works from the Dowager Lady Fielakepa, a senior custodian of Koloa, featured practices such as barkcloth making and fine weaving. The exhibition was as refreshing for presenting Tongan art to a wider audience as it was for expanding ideas of contemporary artistic practices. ▶▶





LEFT
**PARA SITE CONTEMPORARY
 ART CENTRE**

Co-curators Cosmin Costinas and Vivian Ziherl argue that there is a need to “include as a matter of urgency practices that have been systematically excluded from the realm of art and designated by a colonial ethnographic gaze as craft, folklore or, at best, ‘traditional’ art”. Admiring the richly detailed ngatu, or barkcloth panels, and ta’avola, woven mat wraps, you would agree with Costinas and Ziherl that “they are works of highly sophisticated artistic, ecological, navigational and socio-political complexity, with ongoing and vivid significance”.

High up in the Andes, in the Peruvian city of Cusco, is Xapiri Ground, a not-for-profit organisation that promotes the art and culture of Peru’s indigenous Amazonians. Its discreet shopfront hides a trove of treasures, including intricately patterned clay animals and jars by Shipibo-Konibo women and vibrant geometric textiles of the Iskonawa people and by Yine artist Emily Urquía Sebastián, whose designs are inspired by traditional body art. All monies raised from sales are reinvested into the creation of more art and on-the-ground projects that facilitate sustainable economies.



ABOVE
SHEZAD DAWOOD
 Installation view, *Between
 Land & Sea*, 2021

Photo by PADDY BARRY

According to Melanie Dizon, creative director of Xapiri Ground: “the essence of Amazonian indigenous art is born from mythopoesis, storytelling, and song, expressed through each culture’s iconography, techniques, colours and materials, most of which stem from the natural environment that surrounds and sustains their life.”

On Fogo Island, a windswept settlement off Newfoundland, Canada, communities have embraced a social business model in place of a struggling cod-fishing industry. A charitable initiative, Shorefast, founded the luxurious Fogo Island Inn, and Fogo Island Arts (FIA), a residency-based contemporary arts organisation that brings in artists, curators, filmmakers, writers, musicians, designers and thinkers from around the globe. The island’s wild beauty and thoughtful art shows have become drawcards for intrepid travellers.

Claire Shea, adjunct researcher at FIA, says: “Fogo Island has a rich legacy of craft traditions, including those that have historically supported the local community of fishermen at sea, in forms such as net making and boat building,

and crafts that contributed to the built environment onshore.” What’s more, many artists take cues from local craft practices. A recent exhibition by Abbas Akhavan referenced the island’s elevated wooden sheds for landing and processing fish.

Earlier this year, Shezad Dawood’s *Between Land & Sea* featured textile-based paintings, video and a reworked handmade fishing net from the 1970s. And in 2018, artist Ieva Epnere employed textiles, oral tradition and music as key components of her work, as a means of exploring the rich local histories embedded in the landscape.

Those visitors who wish to take home a memento of the island should check out Fogo Island Workshops. Here, local makers create contemporary furniture, textiles and homewares that are rooted in traditional craft. Sure, the colourful handmade quilts and throws have a home-spun quality, but they’re no less deserving of your attention, for the emotions they convey and the stories they tell, as a roped-off exhibit in a grand museum.