

**Book Review by Pippa Galpin**

***A Theory of Craft; Function and Aesthetic Experience***

Howard Risatti

The University of North Carolina Press

Howard Risatti proposes a theory of craft that is born out of a relationship between function and aesthetic experience. This position at once connects natural forms to human needs, as in a nest to the basket, or a watering hole to the bowl, with the meanings that these archetypes are able to carry.

At times the examples that underpin the argument are almost anecdotal in style, drawing on analogies that resonate beyond the confines of the text. For example when considering the relationship between looking, seeing and knowing, Risatti sites Hans-Georg Gadamer suggesting that how we encounter something goes beyond simply looking. This point is made clear by a simple example:

Say we are at an airport to pick up someone and passengers are leaving the gate. Though we look at them, we pay little attention, except to subconsciously note that the plane must have arrived. Then we look at someone we recognize and say hello. We recognize the person because we know him to be a neighbor from down the street. Soon we recognize the person we have come to meet, an old friend we have known for many years, and we embrace. In both instances it is clear that recognition involves more just than looking, that recognition only comes from knowing. (p.8)

This point is used to highlight the way that such familiarity brings with it a sense of ‘re-knowing’. Core to his argument is that a reiteration of the real world is a quintessential part of how we appreciate functional craft objects.

By defining what craft is and what it does, in relation to fine art, Risatti sets out where they overlap and how craft is unique. One of the ideas he develops is that the relationship between the hand and the body is characteristic of the craft object, both in relation to fit, as in the way an ‘armrest must accommodate the arm’ and through making as an ‘extension of the mind’. (p.109) Risatti describes how literally, the ‘handsomeness’

(p.110) of an object is derived from its handle-ability, an understanding, which is reached through the physical experience of use, rather than purely of appearance.

While defining and redefining territory for craft, the argument builds as Risatti qualifies where and how ideas of craft overlap with fine art. For example, he notes that in performance art the gap between appearance and reality is intentionally reduced.

Risatti's questioning approach serves to defend the genre by unpacking what we mean by craft, reviewing the relevance of how, historically, it has come to be considered with a lesser regard than fine art and more recently design. In considering the origin of this schism Risatti refers back to the routes of the word 'aesthetics', which taken from the Greek word *aisthētikos*, referred, not to art and beauty, but to 'one who is perceptive of things through his sensations, feelings, an intuition.' (p.263) A way of being that sits comfortably in a craft domain.

With rigorous analysis throughout the book Risatti develops an argument to show the craft object as able to communicate through different means and so a different content to that of art or design.

By contrasting art with craft the debate is also useful in the way it refined what is meant by art, but I wonder if it would appeal to a broad based art audience and so fulfill its aim to re-position craft as a separate but equal genre. If anything my concerns are that by carving out such a clear territory the book might alienate the very people for whom it will be most useful, those who sit on that fertile ground between art and craft.

Although stylistically quite readable, the self-referential nature of the argument means that you need to read to the end, as many of the exceptions, or qualifications take quite a long time in coming. This structure might make it difficult to use to underpin academic discussion. That said, as a PhD student in Ceramics, I will be making close reference to it.

I was interested to note that the newly reopened Rijksmuseum, designed to represent the culture of the Netherlands, includes art, design, craft and historical objects along side each other. What is it that craft objects have that fine art objects do not? It is this question that *A Theory of Craft* helps to pose. I just wish it had gone a bit further in doing so, with more examples from the many that are available.