



## **Brent Kington: Mythic Metalsmith - Activities**

### **Illinois State Museum**

#### **Lesson Plan: Art or Craft?**

**Inspiration:** Brent Kington, from his oral history interview, when asked about function in his work: “You know, it's something I've been thinking about for more than 10 years. It seems to me that sometime, maybe even before the '90s, but certainly into the '90s, that function started becoming less and less part of my vocabulary. I don't know where that puts me, and I don't even care. That's somebody else's problem-probably is going to be somebody else's job to figure out what it's all about. I do like making functional things, but most recently, if I made a functional piece, it's likely to be a tool, a hammer of a particular size, or another adze to do a particular job.”

**Goal:** students will be able to recognize the craft and art characteristics of metal objects after a discussion (of the history of the art versus craft split by aestheticians in the 18th and 19th centuries) by arranging a group of metal objects in a continuum from craft-like to art-like, backing up their choices with appropriate arguments.

#### **Concepts:**

- Blacksmithing as a science: there are technological, chemical, and physical properties of metal that a smith must understand and master.
- Blacksmithing as a craft: there is a set of skills and techniques that needs to be mastered.
- Blacksmithing is an art: using the mastery of knowledge, skills, and techniques, the smith can plan and create 1) utilitarian objects that display the elements of design not related to function. 2) non-utilitarian objects that are artistic, such as sculpture.
- Blacksmithing today is passed on by instructors in colleges and art schools more than through apprenticeships; therefore, the students learn the elements of design and principles of art as well as the technology.
- A blacksmith's customers today are middle and upper bracket buyers who want uniquely designed functional metal pieces such as fences, gates, railings, tables, chairs, vessels, weapons -- or art pieces like sculpture. They pay more to have one-of-a-kind designs and they pay for quality.

### Pre- and Post-test Questions:

- How do you define craft? What are three examples of crafts?
- How do you define art? What are three examples of arts?
- Can there ever be overlap between craft and art? How?
- Who decides what is art and what is craft?

**History of Art versus Craft:** Art for Art's Sake did not become a Bohemian slogan until the mid-to-late nineteenth century. There had been philosophical discussion of the idea in eighteenth century Europe. Before that most artists were guildsmen who learned their craft by apprenticeship and worked on commissions by rich and powerful people and institutions to make paintings, sculpture, metal objects, woodcarvings, etc. for public, ecclesiastical, and private use. As soon as there was a middle class in Europe, there was a demand for fine art and craft.

In the twentieth century, the split between craft and art has been discussed and argued. Many of the traditional crafts (wood, ceramics, metals, glass, fiber) have redesigned themselves as arts or art crafts. It is not enough now for a craftsperson to create finely made pieces -- an artistic quality is sought by those who buy craft pieces. While there is a wide gap between conceptual art pieces and unique wrought iron railings, for instance, there is also a gap between these railings and the mass-produced machine-made railings found at box stores. Students are encouraged to give their own current definitions of art and craft.

### Web sites:

- a short article from [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_for_art%27s_sake) on the origins of the argument  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art\\_for\\_art%27s\\_sake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_for_art%27s_sake)
- University of Virginia article in [Dictionary of the History of Ideas](http://etext.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv1-18)  
<http://etext.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv1-18>

**Discussion:** It is possible for anyone to see the differences in artistic quality among individual pieces of metalwork. Some are purely functional without much thought for looks other than the shape necessary to function. Other pieces reflect an attempt on the part of the smith to add some flair or grace to a utilitarian piece. There are still other pieces in which the artistic style is as important as the function. Lastly, some pieces are meant to be appreciated for their artistic value alone.

**Activity:** After having familiarized themselves with the [history of smithing](#) in the previous lesson, and discussing the above concepts with examples, students will look at the eight images of metal objects presented here ([print and display the images \(pdf\)](#) on a table or pin them up in a circular group) and decide by consensus where each image lies on a craft-art continuum. They will arrange the images from left to right from craft toward art and give reasons for their choices.

**Extension:** teacher or students bring in man-made metal objects with which to do the same activity as above. Arrange the objects by craft to art order, including functional to non-functional, well-made to artistically well-made.

## National Art Standards, Grades 5-8

### **Content Standard 2: Using knowledge of structures and functions** [-]

(compare the structures and functions of multiple pieces of metalwork)

Students generalize about the effects of visual structures and functions and reflect upon these effects in their own work.

Students employ organization structures and analyze what makes them effective or not effective in the communication of ideas.

### **Content Standard 4: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures** [-]

(how do the given metal objects reflect their time and culture?)

Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures

Students describe and place a variety of art objects in historical and cultural contexts

Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art.

## National Art Standards, Grades 9-12

### **Content Standard 2: Using knowledge of structures and functions** [-]

(how do the given metal objects characteristics and structures reflect their uses?)

Students demonstrate the ability to form and defend judgments about the characteristics and structures to accomplish commercial, personal, communal, or other purposes of art

### **Content Standard 4: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures** [-]

(how do the metal objects made by traditional smiths compare with those made by the art smiths in our web site?)

Students differentiate among a variety of historical and cultural contexts in terms of characteristics and purposes of works of art

Students describe the function and explore the meaning of specific art objects within varied cultures, times, and places

**Content Standard 6: Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines** [-]

(how do the metal objects pictured or gathered meet the characteristics of art listed below?)

Students compare the materials, technologies, media, and processes of the visual arts with those of other arts disciplines as they are used in creation and types of analysis

Students compare characteristics of visual arts within a particular historical period or style with ideas, issues, or themes in the humanities or sciences

**Illinois Standards in Fine Arts: Grades 7-8**

**27: Role of Arts in Civilization**

**27.A.3a** [-]

Identify and describe careers and jobs in and among the arts and how they contribute to the world of work. (How does modern blacksmithing fit in to the arts?)

**27.A.3b** [-]

Compare and contrast how the arts function in ceremony, technology, politics, communication and entertainment. (How does modern smithing function in these categories?)

**27.B.3** [-]

Know and describe how artists and their works shape culture and increase understanding of societies, past and present. (What traditional influences can you see in the work of this Web site's metalsmiths?)

**Fine Arts Grades 9-10:**

**27.B.4b** [-]

Understand how the arts change in response to changes in society.

(How is the range of work by modern smiths different from that of 19th century smiths? Why?)