

***Crafting New Traditions: Canadian Innovators and Influences.* Melanie Egan, Alan C. Elder, and Jean Johnson, eds. Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2008. 136 pp. [Distributed by University of Washington Press]**^{*}

Reviewed by Grace Nickel

This collection of essays on Canadian craft history documents a symposium of the same name hosted by the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, Canada, in February 2008.

The book begins with an abstract that clearly summarizes the contents, stating “*Crafting New Traditions: Canadian Innovators and Influences* brings together the work of 11 historians and craftspeople to address the two questions of ‘who has influenced the recent history of Canadian studio craft?’ and ‘who will be considered the “pioneers” of Canadian craft in the future?’” (p. v). To this end, the book manages to successfully uncover some of the reticence and obscurity that the crafts in Canada have endured historically, and continue to be prone to in contemporary practice. In the foreword, William J.S. Boyle, Chief Executive Officer of the Harbourfront Centre laments, “It would appear that we are afflicted with a national amnesia for these forerunners: pioneers of the culture that we today proudly proclaim as Canadian. Shame on us” (p. xv). *Crafting New Traditions: Canadian Innovators and Influences*, lays a solid foundation for a broader study of Canada’s craft history and helps to “stem the tide of cultural forgetting” (p. xv).

The table of contents contains chapter titles that are unnecessarily cryptic, but once into the book, the subtitles of each essay help to illuminate the subjects addressed. Bookended by a beginning chapter on the early history of craft in Canada and a closing chapter that describes one of the country’s most contemporary craft programs, this book is clearly structured into chapter pairs. The first chapter, “The Past is a Foreign Country” by craft historian Sandra Flood, provides an overview of the origins of craft practice in Canada as it relates to early immigration patterns. Largely Eurocentric in focus, this chapter sets up a backdrop for the remainder of the book, that consists of two essays each on five different craft media: pottery, glass, metals, textiles, and wood. The first of each pair of essays presents the historical innovators—those brave enough to introduce new approaches to studio practice or teaching craft in Canada, many of whom are still pursuing vibrant careers today. The counterpart essay that follows features newer artists working in the same medium, the contemporary practitioners who have benefited from the trails blazed by our early pioneers. Often the younger artists have studied under the innovators or have been mentored by them formally or informally. Thus, the book reminds us that the traditions in Canadian craft are still relatively new, introduced by artists and artisans in the last hundred years or less. In this sense, the title of the book rings true. The book reinforces the fact that, so far, only two generations of artists and artisans have been working in Canada long enough to create a history. By ending the book with Melanie Egan’s short but informative essay on the programs at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, the circle becomes complete. At Harbourfront, a third generation of artists is being trained to be innovative and build on the foundation laid by the preceding two generations.

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But wait! There is a catch. The picture of the history and development of craft in Canada is not that neat and tidy. Sandra Alföldy, craft historian at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) University in Halifax, is to be commended for reminding us that the true innovators of craft in Canada were Aboriginal. She writes about “Canada’s Textile Pioneers” and points out that our largely Eurocentric view of Canada’s craft history is shortsighted. If we endeavor to record an authentic history of craft in Canada, we cannot ignore the fact that “strong textile and weaving traditions already existed among Aboriginal craftspeople” (p. 77), long before the first wave of European immigrants came to Canada. In order to truly address the history of craft in Canada, the contribution and expertise of the Indigenous population must be acknowledged and included in any comprehensive study of the origins of crafts in this country.

Crafting New Traditions: Canadian Innovators and Influences is educational. After finishing the book, I felt I had learned something new about the development of craft in Canada. This book will interest artists and artisans, craft historians, curators, teachers, and students of craft. The time is ripe for well-researched and eloquent discourse on the crafts, and *Crafting New Traditions*, although lapsing regularly into technical description, the old language of production and process we are all too familiar with, begins to move outside of our comfort zone. Patty Johnson’s essay on “The Fiction of Studio Furniture” is the most provocative. She dares to question the myth of the romanticized “relationship between maker and material” (p. 111) and points out that “it is quite difficult to have a spiritual rapport with a table saw” (p. 111). Johnson represents much popular thought with her “ever-widening range of definition” (p. 111) for craft. Definitions of craft practice may be broadening, and crossovers and interdisciplinary approaches becoming more common, but the crafts are still hovering somewhere between art and design, folklore and art history, materials and ideas, haptic activity and intellectual experience. *Crafting New Traditions* largely remains true to the material-based nature of traditional craft—one maker, one material—however the boundaries are beginning to blur, and new players are beginning to appear on the scene. As Patty Johnson points out, “I think the most innovative craft practitioners today prefer not to be restricted to one particular material or genre” (p. 107). This complicates matters. She adds, “A broader critical approach is needed in order to avoid the inward spiral which is the most prevalent danger facing crafts as a field of knowledge” (p. 107). Although *Crafting New Traditions* still favors reportage to critique, it begins to provide the important historical basis required for an in-depth analysis and critique of the state of craft in Canada today. By highlighting the Canadian pioneers in craft and the high caliber of their contribution, it contributes to a sense of cultural identity and a feeling of confidence, a confidence that Patty Johnson fears is in crisis. In Alan Elder’s words, this book “serves as another component in the writing of our material and artistic heritage, but also demonstrates how much more we have to do in order to create a comprehensive history of Canadian craft” (p. xi).

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