

function follows form

Back for its second year, SOFA celebrates fine decorative arts
by Dianna Delling

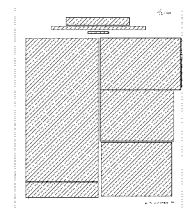
THE LINE BETWEEN FINE ART and design was blurring long before Michael Graves designed his first toaster for Target. It was smudged even before the first International Sculpture Objects and Functional Art Fair—aka SOFA—took place at Navy Pier in Chicago in 1994. But the success of both SOFA and the big-box retailer proves that they were onto something: Fine artists and academics may argue the difference between “fine art” and “design”—or, dare we say it, “craft”—but there’s room all of it in the average living room.

SOFA shows in Chicago, New York, and, as of 2009, Santa Fe feature work that has traditionally been ignored by fine-art museums and shows, including pieces in contemporary glass, ceramics, and metal, along with furniture, textiles, and other “interior design” items. Most are functional objects, so beautifully made or unique in design that you’re happy just to look at them, let alone sit in them, drink from them, or put flowers in them—but their creators won’t mind if you do. Masters from every craft medium are represented (works by Lino Tagliapietra and Dale Chihuly from the glass world, for example), as are up-and-coming artists with the potential to become bigger names.

For dealers like Jane Sauer, whose Jane Sauer Gallery in Santa Fe specializes in medium-based fine art, the SOFA fairs are the most important shows on the calendar. That’s in part because they’re the only ones that focus exclusively on decorative objects, and they are juried fairs that keep the bar high for exhibitors. “I think SOFA opens eyes,” she says. “People come, and they see the tactile and visceral components of this kind of work, and the expression of this kind of work, and they like it. That helps bridge the sort of bias that has developed around terminology. It becomes about the actual art or product, not about what’s it’s called.”

After four successful years in Chicago, SOFA expanded to New York in 1994, and last year, SOFA West premiered in Santa Fe. With 35 galleries and art dealer exhibitors participating, the fair drew more than 10,000 people to the Santa Fe Community Convention Center in early June—a strong debut, but not surprising given Santa Fe’s ability to attract art lovers as a collecting and vacation destination. It was strong enough that SOFA West is returning again, taking over the Convention Center this year July 8–11, coinciding with the popular International Folk Art Market at Museum Hill.

Some SOFA events will be familiar to last year’s fair-goers. Members of the Museum of New Mexico Foundation will again be invited to preview the show on the evening of Wednesday, July 7, and curators, artists, and collectors will be giving lectures (open to all SOFA ticket holders) throughout the weekend. But this year organizers have made an effort to bring more of New Mexico’s contemporary decorative art—specifically, Native contemporary art—into the mix. SOFA is sponsoring Historic Bond/Contemporary Spirit: Collecting New Southwest Native Pottery, for example, a three-day, pre-fair symposium featuring ceramic scholar Garth Clark. Southwestern



Association for Indian Arts executive director Bruce Bernstein, and former Museum of Fine Arts director Ellen Bradbury.

“Santa Fe is the center of the study and collection of Pueblo pottery, so it seemed important to bring that sensibility to the fair—to give it a unique and specific attachment to the region,” says Mark Lyman, SOFA’s founding director.

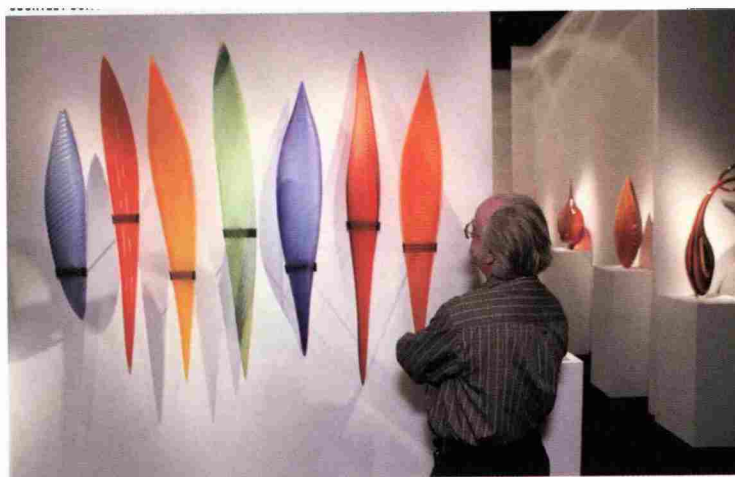
Native artists will be well represented at the fair itself. Bernstein will show works by contemporary Native metalworkers from New Mexico at a SWAIA booth, and Clark, as a fine ceramics dealer and co-owner of Clark & Del Vecchio, will showcase contemporary Native pottery.

“We have the opportunity to create a fair that’s different than the ones in New York and Chicago,” says Clark, who’s been showing ceramic artists at SOFA since the first Chicago event. While the Native artists he represents create using traditional mediums and traditional techniques, he explains, their work also moves in new directions. “These works are not without Native resonance. It’s just abstracted.”

Like Charlotte Jackson, who heads up Art Santa Fe (see previous page), SOFA’s creators believe Santa Fe’s strong summer arts lineup is good for the city—and that the city is good for the art fairs. “We are certainly impressed with the fact that there are so many fine galleries here,” says Lyman. “Let’s hope this fair and all the other activities over the summer can help encourage new buyers and new collectors to come into town and avail themselves of all Santa Fe’s treasures.”



COURTESY SOFA



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Top: Some of the artworks at last year's SOFA West at the Santa Fe Community Convention Center; above: more works at last year's SOFA West show