

Ruth and Rick Snyderman: Fifty Years of Fine Crafts

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

“What is Craft? Making close contact with materials, technical skills plus imagination, tangible results in the form of things, sometimes pushing at the outer limits of function, taking the material for a walk. The American Customs & Excise definition of ‘a work of art’ is that the owner must be able to prove it is completely useless. Craft work is something else, though it can produce objects for contemplation as well as objects for use.”

— Christopher Frayling,
Royal College of Art, London

The American studio craft movement started in the 19th century as a reaction to and rejection of mechanization and mass production. Independent artists and studios began creating well-designed and well-crafted, one-of-a-kind functional objects from various materials including wood, glass, ceramics, textiles and metal.

After World War II, European artists brought their traditions and knowledge to America. As a result of their influence, the craft movement in America became international in scope. By mid-20th century, Center City residents Ruth and Rick Snyderman had developed their appreciation for fine crafts. The Snydermans’ galleries mounted shows by top artists and craft studios, and eventually the couple became Philadelphia’s leading craft exhibitors. They are pioneers in development of not only the craft market and art appreciation programs but also emerging neighborhoods in Philadelphia.

Artists don’t get enough credit for economic development. Often marginal

neighborhoods with cheap rents attract artists; soon restaurants, galleries, shops and theaters move in, and the neighborhood becomes a vibrant magnet for new residents and visitors. The Snydermans are a case in point.

In 1965, Ruth Snyderman founded The Works Gallery on Locust Street, which specialized in ceramics, jewelry and fiber. Later the gallery moved to South Street, where Ruth was active in the South Street Renaissance of the 1970s. Rick Snyderman joined his wife at The Works Gallery in 1972, and in 1983 he formed Snyderman Gallery, specializing in contemporary studio furniture and glass. Knowing that rents would rise as the area became more popular, the Snydermans purchased their buildings and helped other entrepreneurs do the same, enabling them to stay on South Street as it developed.

In 1992 Rick Snyderman moved his gallery to Old City, where he helped launch First Friday, a monthly event that draws thousands of visitors, attracted by more than 50 galleries and design studios, visual and performing arts centers, museums, theaters and restaurants. Old City has become one of Philadelphia’s major cultural attractions. In 1996, the two galleries merged into Snyderman-Works Galleries, and continue to be the center of Philadelphia’s craft world, exhibiting works by internationally known artists.

In 2015, the Snydermans celebrated the 50th anniversary of their marriage and the founding of the gallery. Both have been astounding successes. Their son, Evan, curated a special exhibit to commemorate the dual anniversary, and made a video,



Ruth and Rick Snyderman in front of Warren Seelig’s “Shadowfield Granite Path”

Fifty Years and Counting, the Snyderman Family, Pioneers of Craft. In the video we see the work of various artists, learn the history of the galleries, and hear commentary by artists, collectors, other gallery owners, family and friends. According to Evan Snyderman, who narrates, the Snyderman family includes the “artists, collectors, and friends that Rick and Ruth have made along the way, who are welcomed into an ever-growing circle of people devoted to beautiful objects and their makers.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TjQEJDNdoo&feature=youtu.be>

The couple continue to be active with many local, national, and international organizations, including the Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts (Edgecomb, Maine), The Clay Studio (Philadelphia), and the National Crafts Council of Ireland.

Snyderman-Works Galleries’ Tenth International Fiber Biennial, an invitational exhibit of nationally and internationally prominent artists, opens March 4 and runs through April 16. You can visit Snyderman-Works Galleries at 303 Cherry Street, Tuesday through Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. <http://www.snyderman-works.com/>

Seelig To Be Honored April 7

Warren Seelig, a visiting professor at the University of the Arts, whose work “Shadowfield Granite Path” is displayed at right and above at the Snyderman-Works Galleries, is to be honored April 7 by the university. His work is in the permanent collections of the Philadelphia International Airport and the Pennsylvania Convention Center, and has been exhibited extensively as part of the U.S. State Department’s Art in Embassies program, most recently at the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem.

WARREN SEELIG



Warren Seelig, “Shadowfield Granite Path,” granite and silver-brazed stainless steel, 2011

Courtesy of the artist and Snyderman-Works Galleries