

History in the Making features four artists whose work explores the deep roots of contemporary American craft, design, and decorative arts. Ubaldo Vitali is a fourth-generation silversmith and master conservator of antique silver who uses classical techniques learned in the guilds of Rome to create luminous works for popes, kings, and presidents. Cliff Lee, a neurosurgeon by training, creates elegant porcelain vessels with the exactitude of a doctor, often using his knowledge of chemistry to re-create medieval Chinese glazes long thought lost to history. Judith Schaechter brings considerable knowledge of stained glass practice to her moody windows, which reflect influences from Gothic art to punk rock. Matthias Pliessnig combines traditional boat-building techniques and 3-D design technology to create innovative furniture out of steam-bent oak strips.

In mining and transcending traditions in silver, porcelain, glass and wood, each artist highlights the continuing pull of function as a subject of investigation in contemporary craft. While not every object is made to be used, all address this base rationale for manufacture. They are scaled to our bodies so that we may hold them (Vitali and Lee) or that they may hold us (Pliessnig) or shelter us (Schaechter). Their allure is in the visceral response this induces and in the wealth of technical and aesthetic possibilities apparent from an acute understanding of things past.

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Ubaldo Vitali

born Rome, Italy 1944 • resides Maplewood, NJ

Ubaldo Vitali serves as a direct link to centuries of established practice in the crafting of silver. His family's shop was founded by his great-grandfather (and namesake) in 1886 in Rome, where Vitali was raised and educated. He immigrated to the United States soon after completing his apprenticeship but remains an active member of the Roman goldsmith's guild whose origins date back to the Renaissance. He is the only guild member permitted to live outside the city, underscoring the continued respect for his work in Italy.

Vitali's early work in the United States consisted of limited production series for high-end retailers such as Tiffany, Bulgari, and Cartier—a path that quickly pushed the artist to adapt his Old World education to a contemporary market. The long-term result of this shift in focus is a deft marriage of historically based practice and modern design. Presentation pieces, such as the two tureens at right, illustrate this dance perfectly: the example with sodalite handles includes sea forms cast from life in the traditional manner, giving the piece a distinctly classical feel; the other example is stripped of all ornament, save its ebony highlights, focusing attention on the sleek lines of the carefully raised vessel itself.

Vitali's contributions to the field of silver extend far beyond the output of his shop. He is a noted scholar on the development of style and technique over time. He also works as a conservator of antique silver on major pieces for clients, including museums and auction houses. The seventeenth-century New York teapot at left was missing its handle, and was marred by dents and cracks, before finding its way to the artist. The discretion to work on such objects allows Vitali a deeper understanding of historical craftsmanship, which in turn influences the creation of his most forward-looking pieces.

Cliff Lee

born Vienna, Austria 1951 • resides Stevens, PA

Cliff Lee is particularly well suited to bridge tradition and innovation in clay. Raised in Taiwan, the son of a diplomat in Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, he was surrounded by examples of Chinese porcelain and steeped in the dynastic history that forms the basic narrative for the region's arts. He attended medical school in the United States, then practiced neurosurgery in Pennsylvania for five years before stress drove him in search of an avocation. After a patient introduced him to the medium, Lee attended ceramics courses and was instantly hooked by the potter's wheel.

The body of work Lee has produced over the last three decades hinges on the complementary relationship between his upbringing, the technical knowledge acquired through practicing medicine, and the precision demanded of a surgeon. He is particularly drawn to porcelain, because it is what he calls an "honest material," unforgiving of blemishes or mistakes. The carving on Lee's celadon vessels is achieved using both scalpels and hand-made tools, and helps to reveal the clay's famed translucence. The natural subjects are inspired by the landscape near the Lees' property in rural Pennsylvania, and by similar motifs in Chinese porcelains.

The hand-mixed glazes—celadon, oxblood, *guan*, *temmoku*, and others—are the result of years of research into their original chemical makeup during China's Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (960–1911). Each presents its own challenges, but none is as elusive as Lee's imperial yellow glaze (so called for its use by the Ming court), which took seventeen years to discover, only to be lost again for several more. With so much at stake, each object in this gallery represents a small victory in Lee's continuing struggle to honor and enhance the rich history of craftsmanship in his ancestral home.

Judith Schaechter

born Gainesville, FL 1961 • resides Philadelphia, PA

Judith Schaechter has single-handedly revolutionized the craft of stained glass through her unique aesthetic and inventive approach to materials. The roots of her postmodern stew of content trace back to childhood visits to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where the artist searched out the most gruesome paintings in the Western canon (the beheading of St. John the Baptist was a favorite). A self-described outsider, Schaechter grew up bookmarking equally jarring scenes across a range of media and contexts—Civil War battlefields, Victorian mourning rituals, underground comics, the East Village art scene, and punk rock among them.

Schaechter was introduced to stained glass as a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, and quickly found a voice for her particular passions in the medium's historical narratives and often graphic imagery. Forlorn young things typically inhabit her windows, trapped in environments that can be oppressive (*The Sin Eater*) or inviting (*Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*), but that always offer a touch of the sublime. *A Little Torch* illustrates the unbridled aggression of her early work, while the recent *Widow* quietly captures similar themes of mortality in a different tone. A more personal investigation of loss follows the death of Schaechter's great-great-great-uncle, John Fletcher Hamlin, a soldier in the Army of the Potomac who died at the battle of Petersburg in 1864.

What ultimately unifies these disparate worlds is Schaechter's dedication to the craft itself. Each window reveals decades of experimentation outside of traditional methods for making stained glass. By sandblasting, engraving, and layering flash glass, Schaechter has invented new ways to capture the light, offering each one of us a transcendent experience.

Matthias Pliessnig

born New Orleans, LA 1978 • resides Philadelphia, PA

Matthias Pliessnig's extraordinary amorphous furniture has its unlikely roots in the history of wooden boat-building. While studying at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Pliessnig and two others embarked on a project to each build a simple skiff for use on the town's surrounding lakes. Muddling through the basics of marine design required learning to steam-bend wood, an ancient technique that effectively boils the resin inside wood, rendering the stock malleable. Use of steam bending is evident in the shape of boat hulls across the globe but has only influenced furniture design sporadically, including the eighteenth-century development of the Windsor chair and the nineteenth-century catalogue of the Austrian firm Gebrüder Thonet.



Classic 12 sailboat, 2006
designed by Platt Monfort,
Monfort and Associates,
constructed by Matthias Pliessnig
white oak, fir, Kevlar roving,
Dacron, Tyvek
Courtesy of the artist

Pliessnig's epiphany was the realization that a boat's skeleton—the “stations” running from port to starboard, and “stringers” running from bow to stern—could be adapted for seating by flipping the form upside down and contouring it to the body. The works in this gallery illustrate the scope of this experiment and wood's surprising durability under the stress of the

steam-bending process. Each strip can be manipulated for only thirty seconds upon exiting the steamer, necessitating a frenetic pace of work. Yet each step is carefully planned. Using Rhino 3-D modeling software, Pliessnig plots each curve, arriving at increasingly complex designs, before testing his hypotheses in real time. Once positioned, the strips are clamped in place to cool so that they will retain their new shape, and each of the several thousand points of contact is glued with marine epoxy. In melding old and new technologies with an obsessive level of craftsmanship, Pliessnig has revitalized the long-standing debate in American design over the most desirable way to sit.

Ubaldo Vitali



Photo by Anthony Cavaleri

The intentions and work of the sculptor are to create forms that interact with space. My aim is to “fine-tune” silver’s surfaces and reflections as a means of communication. My work follows three stages. I start with the *primo pensiero*, or “first thought.” I try to distill the original idea to extract its essence, a process that begins by investigating and nourishing the form in a two-dimensional way with sketches. I usually refrain from executing a finished drawing, since I believe it can “suffocate” the idea.

In the second stage, I transfer the idea into a three-dimensional model, or *bozzetto*, to explore the interactions of function with form, and form with space. To create the model, I use any possible material, such as clay, wax, wood, paper or other easily shaped substance to maintain the idea in a state of flux, fluid and unrestricted.

In the final stage, the idea is transformed into silver. From sinking or raising by hammer, from casting, to chasing, to soldering I try to blend and merge each technique accordingly, since each of these choices, whether a tool or process, determines the final result. At this stage the silver becomes an active participant; I must not just dictate to the metal but listen to it. Tools, fire, and my hands are how we communicate.

Cliff Lee



Photo by Douglas Lee

I start by mixing the porcelain according to my own formula, which is a combination of minerals from the earth. This formula makes a strong bond with the monochrome glazes that I use. To form a vessel, I work on a potter's wheel, applying to or altering the shape in order to achieve a desired form. It is then set aside to become leather-hard so I can turn it upside down to trim the bottom. This completes the desired form. At this time I can carve a design into it, using tools that I make out of hacksaw blades. When the vessel is completely dry, I bisque fire it in an electric kiln.

Next I apply the glaze. I choose one of the monochrome glazes that I mix using various chemicals. I spray the glaze onto the bisque ware to the desired thickness. I fire the vessels for thirty-six hours in a gas kiln, waiting a week to open the kiln and see if it's a good firing. Often 50 percent of the work will not turn out the way I hoped for.

Judith Schaechter



Courtesy of the artist

I use a material called flash glass, a type of glass with a paper-thin veneer of intense color on a base layer of lighter color. First, I cut the glass using a steel wheel cutter and a grozing, or running pliers. Next, I sandblast the pieces, which allows me to remove the colored layer in stages to get patterns and tones. After sandblasting, I engrave smaller details using a flexible shaft engraver. I also use diamond files to make smooth variations in the color.

The only paint I use is black vitreous paint, which fires onto glass at 1212°F. I usually do 2-5 firings, as that is the best way to get rich blacks and grays. Sometimes I also use silver stain, a pigment of silver oxide that fires onto glass a transparent yellow. I get a little additional color with thin washes of transparent oil paint. This is all the paint I use—all the other color is the flash glass. After the firings are all done, I then assemble the window, joining individual pieces of flash glass using copper foil and solder. To create the rich range of colors in each section of my pictures I layer the flash glass—sometimes up to five pieces deep. The finished window is installed in a lightbox.

Matthias Pliessnig



Courtesy of the artist

Throughout my education and still now, I have been searching for a balance of technology, art, design, and craft. I begin most ideas in a sketchbook, thinking about the person(s) interacting with the piece. These sketches are translated into the computer using powerful 3-D modeling software where I build virtual models of my ideas. I become familiar with the geometries and build a mold using the information from the computer model. The mold comprises cross-section profiles necessary to understanding the flow of my desired form. I mill strips of wood from rough lumber, which are then placed in a steam-filled pipe to make the wood malleable. After fifteen minutes I quickly take the wood out, with about thirty seconds to bend the strip atop the mold to create a skeletal structure. The wood still has rules, although it's pliable and intuition is needed. After the first piece is bent into place, each following piece is a reaction to the first bend, creating a fluent conversation. Once the wood is dry, each intersection is glued. The entire piece is sanded and a clear coat of finish is applied.