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THE FASHION ISSUE



WENDELL CASTLE



SCULPTURES YOU CAN SIT ON

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W

endell Castle does not look his age. At 75 (he turns 76 this November), he has managed to pull off the biggest commercial show of his career and prove that a decade

after decade his ideas have stayed relevant. Trained as a sculptor, he is called a pioneer of design as art. Since the early sixties sculpture and design have been happily married in his mind, despite the art and furniture worlds' efforts to keep the two separate. His exhibition last summer at Barry Friedman, Ltd. (on view from May 1 through July 27) consisted of all-new designs, with nothing older than two years. Traces of his design vocabulary were everywhere, along with a return to almost every material in his repertoire — laminated wood, fiberglass, bronze, gold leaf, and stainless steel. But nothing about it seemed recycled.

Whitewall visited Castle during one of his monthly trips from his studio in Scottsville, New York, to the big city. Behind his bright blue, circle-frame glasses was a man still riding the success of his latest show, with no prospect of slowing down. In a contemporary design arena that is flooded with young European protégés of Marcel Wanders, we felt a bit proud to be able to call one of the top designers worldwide — a fellow American.

WHITEWALL: *In your earlier work, you were quoted as saying that you "wanted to take the base out from under the table." And what resulted in your furniture was a heavily rooted base, almost mimicking a tree trunk. But with this body of work at Barry Friedman, Ltd., the bases of many chairs or tables are rounded at the bottom — just kissing the floor. They're almost floating.*

WENDELL CASTLE: With the earlier vocabulary I did have some association with trees, which I haven't done nowadays. Other parts I have readopted. The certain largeness, the balance act of things, the soft forms, and there are a few wooden chairs that are closer to my older pieces.

WW: *Some of the fiberglass work reminds me of the plastic lamps you did in the sixties. Do you see your work now as influenced by your work from decades ago? Do you see it as slightly cyclical?*

WC: After some time has passed, and a lot of other things have influenced me, I think about things I did before, but it comes out differently. I think that I was really fortunate when I first started that I got off on a good direction. And it was probably because I had no idea how to make furniture, since I'd never studied.

WW: *You studied as a sculptor first.*

WC: Right, I was a sculptor, so I came at it with fresh eyes. I had none of the traditional skills that somebody who makes furniture has. I had to invent new vocabulary that didn't require any of the traditional furniture-making skills, and essentially that was carving. Sculptors carve. And I became a carver in a sense, but I made the shapes that I carved, unlike before when people would find a tree. I didn't find that suitable. So I built up out of whatever material I needed, foam more recently, but earlier wood ...

WW: *With your famous laminating process. How did you come up with that process? It's something that you've used throughout your career.*

WC: I remember when I was a little kid reading an article in one of these "how to do it" magazines on how to make a duck decoy. It suggested you saw cross sections out of quarter-inch pine (which they gave you patterns for), glue them all together, and then sand off the square part.

Well, I never made a duck decoy, but somehow that stuck in my mind. In college I read an article about the sculptor Leonard Baskin showing his process on carved pieces. He had wood glued together into a giant rectangular block and then carved. I thought, if only he had read the article about the duck decoy, he could have saved a huge amount of wood and a huge amount of work! I thought, well, since he didn't figure that out, I've figured that out and I'll use it. That's where the laminations came from.

WW: *So your first ideas for design came from a sculptural process. You've been called the pioneer of design as art in America. How do you see yourself — as sculptor first, designer second?*

WC: It's something I've thought about a lot. When I first thought about it, around 1962, in my mind I wanted to be a sculptor in the traditional sense. After getting my master's at the University of Kansas I moved to New York City and tried to get a gallery. After I'd been here a year and half, I got offered a job teaching furniture design, and I'd only made three pieces of furniture in my life.

The job appealed to me, though, because there I had access to a wonderful workshop and only had to teach two days a week at a pretty good salary. It left me a lot of time where I could use this workshop. I had been struggling in New York with a crummy workshop. I thought, I'll take the job and go for a year or two and then I'll come right back to New York. But I kind of began to like it up there.

Anyway, after seeing what the field was like and finding out who was making what, I came to the conclusion



*“I DON’T SEE ANY SLOWING DOWN.
A LOT OF PEOPLE MY AGE ARE
RETIRED. I COULDN’T THINK OF A
WORSE THING”*





Above: Drawing of Black Widow
 Left: Black Widow, work in progress

“AS ROBERT FROST SUGGESTS, I TOOK THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED”

that nothing interesting was happening in the furniture field. And as Robert Frost suggests, I took the road less traveled. What justified it in my own mind was that I began to see it as no different than sculpture. It wasn't like I was compromising myself, taking on a lesser field. I couldn't see any reason why it couldn't be just as important as sculpture in every way. What's funny is that's kind of happened [laughs].

WW: While you move between the realm of sculpture and design fluidly, as a designer your pieces must be able to physically interact with a person. With your large table, you have in mind the interaction that the person would have with the base — that they could see the legs while sitting at dinner. Do you always approach a piece with that idea in mind?

WC: Yes, I think about how a person is going to look at it and from where. And if the important view is a low view, then you've got to give it a signal for the person to get that low view, otherwise they'll miss it. I also like to play with directing the view about how the piece is held up — “Is that going to balance that?” I'm trying to get people to take a longer look and give them something to reward them.

WW: You said in the New York Times last year in reference to a show at R. 20th Century gallery that “My creative urge is to be at risk, without that it's just not that interesting.” With

the show at Barry Friedman, Ltd., what kind of risks did you take? Are there any specific works you would deem especially risky?

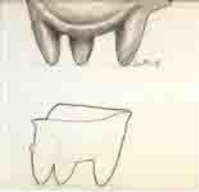
WC: I think it's much more exciting when you're not so sure about it. With this show I think there are a number of risky pieces. The cast pieces, the stainless steel rocker, and the bronzes were risky in that — did it justify the price? You don't know it until you see it. Like with chaise and side tables, I'd never done that technique before. It was enormously time-consuming but worth it. The lace pattern really works.

There are other pieces that I have no idea whether anybody will even begin to think of putting in their home — I don't know if I'd put it in mine! I think there are a lot of pieces that are slightly difficult to use.

WW: And what exactly would we find in your home? I'm interested to know how a designer would furnish his own home.

WC: My home is about 99 percent my design. It's a mix of old pieces and new pieces and extra pieces in storage.

WW: You said some of your pieces may be difficult to use. I think your clocks, for instance, call into question the idea of furniture as pure, comfortable functionality. I read that you're



Sketches of Hevesy's
design of Hevesy's
Chair, at his desk in his studio.



Intrigued by the scientific concept of time as not a constant.

WC: Some of Einstein's ideas are things that I tried to put into clocks. I had a lot of them on paper, but I only actually did one. And one will be shown there for the first time even though I made it over 10 years ago.

Imagine a bell with a handle, lying down, 7 feet in length. If you rolled that, it would make a circle, in this case a 20-foot circle. And it has an internal, with no wires, driving mechanism that will move it around the floor and make one revolution every 12 hours. Einstein suggested something that time doesn't move regularly, it moves in fits and starts. This clock does that, because no floor is ever perfect. It hits a little imperfection in the floor, it stops for a little while, and then it will move forward quickly because it needs to catch up to where it should be.

WW: Can you tell time with it?

WC: There's actually no way to tell time with the clock itself. But you can assign, say, a window as being 12 and on the basis of that you can tell time.

I love that the clock is ambiguous, that if you came in without anybody telling you what you're looking at, you'll have no idea what you're looking at. And how does that become different than sculpture?

WW: Still, you come back to the dichotomy of structure or design. Why do you think, especially in the American context, the two have remained separate for so long?

WC: Well, I can guess. I think the design education is better in Europe. I think art has a much greater chance of advanced technology in Europe than here. Here you cannot get any

cooperation with industry. Just trying to get those things nickel-plated — they now take us seriously, but they didn't even want to talk to us. They heard *sculpture* and they didn't want anything to do with it. I think that European designers have a bigger access to advanced technology than we do here.

WW: So how do you see this getting resolved in the U.S.? We have some design galleries, but those are spaces that cater mostly to collectors. What about the everyday person shopping for furniture? We've had Philippe Starck at Target, and that did well in sales, but how many people who bought his items at Target saw "Designed by Philippe Starck" and actually took an interest in design? When you were teaching, did you make the effort to make sure that your students were knowledgeable about the design world?

WC: Education is one thing, but also a culture that appreciates design and cooperation between designers and industry. Right now you just don't get that anywhere. Right now, even with my reputation, I don't get any attention. Design students have the opportunity in Europe, but in the U.S. you can't get access when doing limited editions.

WW: You're 75, you've been doing this for over 40 years, and yet you don't seem to have any prospect of slowing down in your future.

WC: I don't see any slowing down. A lot of people my age are retired. I couldn't think of a worse thing. They retire so they can pursue their hobby — well, I'm doing that. I don't think I do get it right every time, but I think I've gotten it right a few times.