

## Castles in the Sitting Room: Furniture as High Art

Wendell Castle's 60-plus years of work on display at the Museum of Arts and Design



Wendell Castle seated on 'Long Night' (2011). PHOTO: ADRIEN MILLOT/WENDELL CASTLE/FRIEDMAN BENDA

By ANDY BETA

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In advance of Wendell Castle's coming solo exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design, two of the artist's abstract, bulbous bronze sculptures the color of ashen clay sat on the sidewalk outside the museum. As three female tourists rested on the one titled "Wandering Mountain," a homeless man reclined on the piece called "Temptation," as if on a couch.

When asked if they knew they were sitting on art, one woman replied: "It's cute and comfortable, too. It's functional art."

"Comfortable" and "functional" aren't words often used to describe Mr. Castle's work. As "Wendell Castle Remastered," opening Tuesday, makes evident, this is an American furniture artist who, for more than 60 years, has crafted fantastical, seemingly impossible-to-manufacture objects: cantilevered

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wooden chairs resembling chunky squids, cabinets channeling pomegranates and fiberglass chairs reminiscent of pulled molars.

While Mr. Castle has been involved in more than 20 exhibitions at the museum during his career, “Wendell Castle Remastered” marks his first solo exhibition there. In addition to surveying his influential six-decade career as a pioneer of the art-furniture movement, it also explores how, in recent work, Mr. Castle’s old-school handiwork now intersects with modern robotic techniques.

“What attracts me to this kind of furniture-making is the adventure and risk-taking of it,” Mr. Castle, 82 years old, said from his studio in Rochester, N.Y. “I enjoy trying to push those boundaries to an extent where there is no definite thing you know about a piece. With every part you’re learning and doing something you’ve never done before.”



‘Walnut Sculpture’ (1958-59) PHOTO: ADAM REICH/WENDELL CASTLE/FRIEDMAN BENDA

Born in rural Kansas, Mr. Castle studied sculpture at the University of Kansas. After an instructor there made a derogatory comment to him about making furniture instead of sculpture, Mr. Castle said it prompted an epiphany. “Why couldn’t it become as important as sculpture?” he said he wondered. “Why couldn’t furniture have all the qualities of sculpture?”

One of his earliest pieces, made from wooden rifle stocks, resembled a high chair. Although Mr. Castle estimated it was about “as comfortable as sitting on a fence,” it gained notice as both sculpture and furniture. And when he moved to New York City in 1961 to pursue art, the piece was part of a major exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, now the Museum of Arts and Design.

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His breakthrough came from a technique he had learned as a young boy for making wooden duck decoys: using thin layers of wood stacked up and glued together in the general shape of an object. This stack-lamination technique, in the estimation of Ron Labaco, a senior curator at the museum, “was proto-3D printing, building up objects with layers.”

The first such piece was a wooden sculpture with tentacle-like protuberances rising upward. But Mr. Castle soon realized that when he flipped the piece over, it resembled a stool.

“Turning the stool over was a pivotal event,” Mr. Castle said. “From that point on, I did not do pure sculpture; I did furniture as sculpture.”

He took a teaching position at the School for American Craftsmen (now called the School for American Crafts) at Rochester Institute of Technology, even though his craftsman skills were still unpolished.

He saw that as a benefit. “When I began making furniture and using lamination, it allowed for these sculptural forms unlike normal furniture—with legs, arms and traditional joinery,” Mr. Castle said. “It allowed me to make furniture without knowing how to make furniture.”

Through most of his career, pieces began as drawings projected on the wall. Templates were made from those and then carved down via chain saw. Now, he is experimenting with higher-tech methods.



‘Blanket Chest’ (1963) PHOTO: DIRK BAKKER/DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

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In 2011, Mr. Castle's studio acquired a multi-axial robot from a post office in Michigan and his assistants re-christened it "Mr. Chips." The effect on Mr. Castle's output was immediate.

"Ten years ago I would've said that certain ideas wouldn't work," Mr. Castle said. "Now we have so much more latitude and territory we can venture into with the robot." Rather than sketch on paper, now Mr. Castle carves pieces into foam and scans the forms into a computer.

Some of the newest works in the exhibit, bronze pieces such as "Impulse Gatherer" and the aforementioned "Temptation," would have been impossible without Mr. Chips's accuracy and its ability to calculate and make cross-sectional cuts through any of Mr. Castle's increasingly complex designs. Since it enables designing on a greater scale, Mr. Castle has been creating some of his largest pieces to date, which thrills him at this stage of his career.

"Maybe I just have a short attention span," Mr. Castle said. "But I keep wanting to do brand new things that push the limits of what I'm supposedly able to do."



The American furniture artist lately has incorporated robotics in the design and manufacture of his works.

*PHOTO: MATT WITTMAYER/WENDELL CASTLE/FRIEDMAN BENDA*

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