

The New York Times

Wendell Castle, 85, Dies; Blurred the Line Between Furniture and Art

By SAM ROBERTS JAN. 26, 2018



Wendell Castle at his studio in Scottsville, N.Y., in 2008. Marie Angeletti, via Friedman Benda

Wendell Castle, the whimsical designer who coaxed wood into weird, mind-bending shapes that blurred the boundary between serviceable furniture and fine art, died on Jan. 20 at his home in Scottsville, N.Y., near Rochester. He was 85.

The cause was complications of leukemia, his brother, Wayne, said.

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“Wendell is the most important postwar American furniture designer, by a long shot,” Glenn Adamson, senior research scholar at the Yale Center for British Art and the former director of New York’s Museum of Arts and Design, told Hyperallergic, an online arts forum.

Trained as an industrial designer and a sculptor, Mr. Castle was after World War II part of what was known as the American studio craft movement. His idiosyncratic works became prized as collectibles, if not necessarily for comfort.

“I thought of the work as sculpture, not furniture,” he told *The New York Times* in 2010. “The fact that it was useful didn’t add anything to it, for me.”



Mr. Castle’s 2016 work “Remembering.” Dan Kukla, via Friedman Benda

When Mr. Castle began exhibiting in galleries, the *Times* critic Joseph Giovannini wrote, his works were viewed as fundamentally radical: “The visual presence of a piece now outweighed its function, design outweighed technique, and form was more important than material.”

Mr. Castle’s only hands-on carpentry training was in an eighth-grade woodworking class. He began his professional career making sculptural furniture by wielding a chain saw.

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He graduated into gluing thin layers of wood together, pioneering that process for sculpting, and later to 3D modeling and computer-guided lathes, routers and milling machines to carve bulbous and ellipsoidal furnishings that doubled as sculptures.

His favorite tool, however, was a pencil.

His sinuous, biomorphic chairs, tables, desks, pianos, clocks and vanities, which resembled giant teeth, a human tongue, elephants' feet and human forms, started as freestyle drawings on rag paper. They morphed into urethane foam models that were laser-scanned by computer, sculpted in slices by a 5,000-pound room-size robot and finished by hand with chisels, sanders and other tools.

“Wood, I realized, could be shaped and formed and carved in ways limited only by my imagination,” Mr. Castle once said.



Mr. Castle's 1958-59 "Walnut Sculpture." Adam Reich, via Friedman Benda

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Slight but conspicuous with his candy-colored eyeglass frames, Mr. Castle taught at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he was artist in residence until his death, and the College at Brockport of the State University of New York. He worked in a studio near his home.

“I invent, distort, deform, exaggerate, compound and confuse as I see it,” Mr. Castle wrote in 2016 for an exhibition of his work at the Rochester Institute. “I obey only my own instincts, which often I do not understand myself. I often draw things I do not understand, but am secure in the knowledge that they may at some point become clear and meaningful.”

Indeed, chromatic fiberglass floor lamps that he couldn’t sell for \$300 apiece when he introduced them in the late 1960s were going for about \$30,000 each four decades later.

“Whatever progress there is in art,” he wrote, “comes not from adaptation, but through daring.”

Wendell Keith Castle was born on Nov. 6, 1932, in Emporia, Kan., the grandson of farmers. His mother, the former Bernice Decker, was a teacher. His father, Marvin, taught vocational agriculture and then became a banker.



A chest of drawers created by Mr. Castle on display in 2014 at the Museum of Art and Design in Manhattan. Linda Rosier for The New York Times

Wendell, who was dyslexic, struggled in school.

“I was not good at anything,” he said. “The only exceptions were drawing and daydreaming, neither of which were valued.”

His first formal art course was an elective he chose as a sophomore at Baker University, a Methodist liberal arts college in Baldwin City, Kan. His teacher persuaded him to transfer to the

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University of Kansas. After serving in the Army in Germany, he graduated in 1958 with a bachelor of fine arts degree in industrial design and also earned a master's in sculpture there.

When he decided at college to build a toolbox for himself instead of buying one, his instructor demanded to know why he was wasting his time making a functional object instead of an artwork. That was when Mr. Castle realized he could do both simultaneously.

After living briefly in Brooklyn, he was recruited in 1962 to teach woodworking and furniture design at the Rochester Institute. He taught a graduate industrial-design seminar there in the 1960s.

Mr. Castle's first marriage ended in divorce. In addition to his brother, he is survived by his wife, Nancy Jurs, an artist and sculptor; a daughter, Alison Castle, a filmmaker; a stepson, Bryon Jurs, an artist who works in the Scottsville studio; a sister, Nancy Benedict; and two grandchildren.



A walnut and leather rocking chair made by Mr. Castle in 1963. Katherine Wetzel/Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Mr. Castle's works are included in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He was represented by the Friedman Benda gallery in Manhattan.

In 2014, Mr. Castle was given the Visionary Award at the Smithsonian Craft Festival.

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He explained in an interview with the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art that many of his surreal designs were inspired by youthful memories — of a wooden duck decoy he saw in a magazine, exaggerated cartoon images of elliptical wheels on accelerating vehicles, oblique images he recalled from the silent German horror film "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari."

If some furnishings seemed baffling, like a two-person chair with a square hole in the back of one seat, Mr. Castle explained that there was a madness to his method.

"If there was any continuity and logic in there, I wanted to throw that out of whack," he told City Newspaper of Rochester in 2016. "There is no reason."

Still, he lived by a set of rules he once published. They included "If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it" and "If you hit the bull's-eye every time, the target is too near."

Mr. Castle likened himself to a conductor, working with assistants and apprentices in Scottsville producing limited-edition fine-art furniture in hardwood, plastic, concrete, metals and stone and more affordable designs for the Wendell Castle Collection in nearby Le Roy, N.Y.

"I already have way more ideas than I'll ever be able to do in my lifetime," he told The New York Times in 1985. "For me the enjoyment is seeing them realized, not having to have my hands on every part of it."

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