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ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN

## Wendell Castle's Home and Studio: A Look Back

A look inside the late design legend's eclectic private realm in Scottsville, New York

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Styled by Michael Reynolds

In 2011, when I first visited Oakwood, Wendell Castle's home in Scottsville, New York, the 79-year-old artist and designer—the subject of a book I was researching—pulled up at the Rochester airport in a vintage BMW. His silver hair was brushed back from a high forehead, and he was wearing his signature blue-rimmed, gogglelike glasses.

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We drove to his studio, where Wendell picked up a 14-inch hydraulic chain saw and, wielding it like a wand, started to cut away at a hunk of walnut. Next, a custom spokeshave in hand, he began to chisel. “You have a conversation,” he said of his intuitive process. “Unexpected things might happen as I’m digging into the wood.” After the impressive display of craftsmanship, he walked me through the hivelike workspace, stopping now and again to give directions to his six-man staff or sketch an idea on a scrap of paper.



Castle, who was born in Emporia, Kansas, in 1932, and died this past January at 85 years old, came to Scottsville by way of New York, settling in the small town around 1962. He began teaching at the nearby Rochester Institute of Technology and would serve as artist in residence there for the rest of his life. The organic, carved-wood shapes that came out of his studio during the 1960s and '70s first caught on as part of the studio-furniture movement. Several decades later, thanks to galleries like R & Co., Friedman Benda, and Carpenters Workshop, his work brings high prices on the collectible-design circuit. His unconventional stools, chairs, tables, and lamps, which evolved stylistically through the years, helped to “elevate furniture into the category of sculpture,” as Wendell put it.

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“Unexpected things might happen as I’m digging into the wood.”

More than 20 years his junior, I was exhausted by the end of that day, but Wendell went off to play two sets of tennis before we drove over to his rambling estate for dinner. With its rubble-stone foundation, clapboard siding, porte cochere, and strident chimneys, Oakwood—where Wendell and his wife, Nancy Jurs, had lived for nearly 50 years—was not at all what I had expected. Approached up a long, looping driveway, it might be the petit manor of an investment banker. But as I stepped inside, warmly greeted by Nancy, an accomplished

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sculptor and ceramist in her own right, the formal outer shell gave way to bohemian clutter within.



In the studio gallery, a pair of Black Widow chairs by Castle face a clay fireplace by Roy Cartwright. Sconces by Nancy Jurs; white clock and floor lamps by Castle.

There was no apparent design logic to the interiors, but instead, a natural process of accumulation and accretion. Wendell’s voluptuous furniture and Nancy’s earthy ceramics complemented each other and created a uniquely personal environment that reflected the spirits of both artists. Some of Wendell’s most famous pieces—many now in the permanent collections of museums including the Met, MoMA, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum—were heaped with newspapers, books, and sweaters. But this was how they were meant to be used: as an everyday part of the domestic landscape.

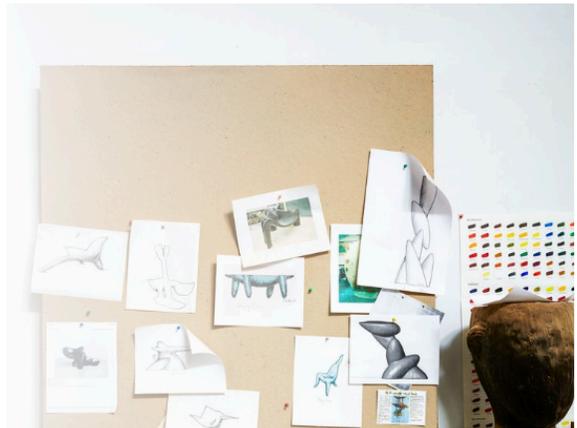
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## Take A Tour Of Wendell's Castle

VIEW SLIDESHOW



We had another whiskey and played more music till late into the night. After a day of marveling at his energy and endurance, I was now reveling in the way he belted out each song with a righteous fervor. I had no idea he was such an accomplished folksinger, but the way he sang made me realize how his design work also came from somewhere deep within the American grain, in the gritty, freight-train spirit of Guthrie and the Kansas plains.

We gathered in the kitchen the next morning, a bit bleary-eyed from our late-night jam. Out the window on the porch, a set of multicolored Molar chairs and a white conference table shimmered in the sun, all relics of Wendell's gel-coated-fiberglass phase of the 1970s, the closest he ever came to mass-market production. We sat for breakfast in his Zephyr chairs, around a petal-like table made from laminated walnut. It had to be one of his most significant works, topped with an elliptical opening that revealed the bending base below. There were no hard edges or right angles. It was both organic and erotic—all of the lines flowing together in undulating synergy. I felt privileged to be sitting there. Looking out over the rolling, 16-acre property, I noticed a humble rope swing, suspended from a copper beech tree. This was where Wendell's grandchildren—and often Wendell himself—came to play. "I'm not really interested in taking vacations," Wendell told me the last time I saw him. "I'm on vacation all the time."

*An exhibition of Castle's work opens on June 23 at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, MO. [nelson-atkins.org](http://nelson-atkins.org)*

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