

MAG exhibit honors Wendell Castle, still inspired after nearly 60 years

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For Wendell Castle, nature is his artistic muse.

At his studio in the idyllic village of Scottsville, he is surrounded by trees and remnants of an old train depot. There, Castle works on his art, sketching his ideas with his team of artisan craftsmen ready to carry out his vision.

"Ideas come from everywhere," said Castle, pointing to root and bark elements in his new work. Over-sized furniture with organic aesthetics is inspiring his creative muse, with bowl-like chairs framed in branches that resemble nature.

Every good work of art deserves a frame, and "I decided to give the chair a frame," he said.

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The larger-than-life chair and frame, as well as 40 other pieces of his work, are currently on display at Memorial Art Gallery. The exhibit, "Wendell Castle Remastered," which opened in October, is the first museum exhibition to showcase the digitally crafted works of Castle, who is considered a leader of the American art furniture movement. A master furniture maker, designer, sculptor and educator, Castle is now in the sixth decade of a career that began in 1958 — one that parallels the emergence and growth of the American studio craft movement.

The exhibition includes several examples that show the innovations of his stack-lamination technique, and a selections from his mold-form fiberglass experiments. These are the inspiration for the contemporary works that Castle has been creating with his state-of-the-art robot, which uses a process comparable to his early stack-lamination carving, now with greater precision.

Castle's current studio practice combines hand craftsmanship — such as carving, rasping and finishing — with digital technologies, including 3D scanning, 3D modeling and computer-controlled milling. These new works will be installed in dialogue with the earlier pieces that inspired them.

At 84, Castle embraces change, welcoming the use of robotics to create art. He turns 85 this month.

"I realize for a lot of reasons, this is the way we had to go," he said. "If we're going to keep up — be at the forefront — we need this technology."

Change is good

Embracing change is how this fine studio artist ended up as a furniture craftsman. Born in Emporia, Kansas, Castle studied fine arts as an undergraduate and a graduate student at the University of Kansas.

Like many aspiring artists, Castle moved to New York City and worked as a fledgling artist. He was drawn to furniture due to the functional aspect of it as it is art that you can use. When an offer to teach at Rochester Institute of Technology came along in 1962, Castle took the chance on the new town with an artistic bend.

From 1962 to 1969, he taught at Rochester Institute of Technology's School for American Crafts and is now an artist in residence. At his studio in Scottsville, he opened Wendell Castle School, which he ran in the 1980s and is now merged with RIT's School for American Crafts. Along the way, he met his wife of 45 years, Nancy Jurs, an artist and sculptor with her own following. He credits much of his success to his wife, a natural extrovert.

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"She's much more likely to start a conversation at a party than I am and that person may turn out to be an important person," Castle said.

Memorial Art Gallery director Jonathan P. Binstock shares his insights Indeed, watching the pair move through the crowds at the opening of the Memorial Art Gallery, the pair's differences in personalities project. Jurs is at ease laughing and making introductions while Castle is more quiet and introspective.

More than 2,500 people saw the show during opening weekend, and the museum hopes that about 20,000 people will see it over the run of the show that ends Dec. 31, said gallery spokeswoman Meg Colombo. There are several events planned at MAG in conjunction with the exhibition, including a "Talk with Wendell Castle" on Nov. 19.

This exhibition is a major point of pride for MAG, director Jonathan Binstock said in a statement. "It is a historical moment for the museum and its longstanding relationship with the artist, and a rare opportunity to share works of art with regional audiences that have been seen internationally but never in Rochester."

There are many great artists working throughout the world, but very few of these have defined an entire genre or category of art, Binstock continued. "Wendell, having pioneered the concept of art furniture, is one of these rare artists, which makes him globally significant. He shows regularly in New York City, London and Paris, and has an upcoming solo exhibition at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, one of America's top art museums. He is of international importance."

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Small town ambience for big city art

In the small historic village of Scottsville on the southwestern tip of Monroe County, Castle is a quiet celebrity. He makes regular appearances at the local Scottsville Diner with his staff or with art-world honchos from New York City.

When he's not traveling to promote his work, Castle continues to work tirelessly as an artist at his studio sketching at the large building that used to be a grain mill. He is currently working on a collaboration with Steuben Glass on a martini glass, experimenting with the design to have a bigger stem base.

His work is collected all over the world and sold through fine art galleries, with retail prices starting at \$150,000. Those lucky enough to have discovered Castle early on have a nice investment in their home. A wood music stand that sold for \$150 in the 1960s now fetches \$150,000 at auction, Castle said.

His work is sold through galleries, with a large contemporary table ready to ship to Florida. He enjoys keeping a bit of a distance from his customers as he creates his art.

"They probably have their own ideas and I don't want to hear their idea," he said.

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While he can be precise and particular as an artist, he is very laid back as a boss, said Tricia Tingling, who has worked with Castle for 19 years.

Much of Castle's time is spent at his studio on Maple Street and he and his wife reside in another home in the village. When he's not at work on his art, he likes to tinker with classic cars, restoring and rebuilding a collection of vehicles from yesteryear.

If you go

What: "Wendell Castle Remastered" exhibition of works by the master furniture maker.

When: Exhibition runs now through Dec. 31. Talk with Wendell Castle, 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 19; included with museum admission.

Where: Memorial Art Gallery, 500 University Ave.

More: mag.rochester.edu.

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