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The BIG BLACK BOOK

Taste

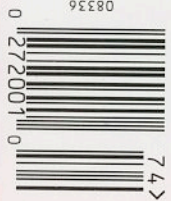
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Vol. 21 Fall + Winter 2017

Form Follows Freedom

A new retrospective looks back on six decades of Wendell Castle's unforgettable yet unclassifiable creations—abstract furniture or functional art?—while the pioneering designer forges ever onward (with a little help from his 2½-ton studio assistant, Mr. Chips).

By Mark Rozzo



When Wendell Castle was on the verge of his 12th birthday, the September/October 1944 issue of *The Delta*, a publication for weekend woodworkers and Mister Fix-Its, landed in his family's mailbox in Coffeyville, Kansas. The cover line seductively called out: MAKE YOUR OWN DUCK DECOYS. The story inside showed how to do just that, revealing that you don't need a big solid block of wood to carve a mallard or pintail or canvasback. Instead, you cut and then glue together successive layers of wood like a sandwich. This "stack lamination" technique, as it is called, yields your basic duck shape, leaving you, the enterprising home craftsman, to put chisels, rasps, files, and sandpaper to the task of creating the final form. For the young Castle, it was a gee-whiz moment: *So that's how you do it!* He filed away this revelation for nearly 20 years,

until, as an aspiring sculptor who suspected he might in fact be a furniture maker (and vice versa), Castle had the somewhat radical idea that he could use the homespun duck-decoy technique to make category-defying objects the likes of which the world had never seen.

"I have a copy of that magazine around here somewhere if you want to see it," Castle said with an obliging laugh when I visited him this past summer at his vast studio, a circa-1895 soybean mill in Scottsville, New York, about 20 minutes southwest of Rochester. In person, he radiates gentle bonhomie, a total lack of pretension, and utter confidence. A photograph from 1968 sums up the wunderkind Castle: He's sporting a rust-colored beard, wearing a white double-breasted suit that would make Tom Wolfe proud, and standing in an overgrown

This page: *Stool* (1963), Castle's first piece using his stack-lamination method, which went from sculpture to furniture when he decided to turn it over. Opposite: Castle, with chain saw, in a white suit and cowboy boots, 1968.



field with a Milwaukee chain saw slung over his shoulder. The effect is of a dandyish Jet Age Paul Bunyan, who, instead of clearing acres of virgin forest, is bent on clearing his own singular path through the worlds of art, design, and craft, while leaving gallerists, fans, critics, and fellow craftsmen amazed, perplexed, and occasionally aghast. As Evan Snyderman, the curator and cofounder of New York's R & Company gallery (which shows vintage Castle works), put it: "He's influenced more people in the furniture world than any other designer in his lifetime. He didn't follow any rules; he created a whole new set of rules."

With his white mane and beard, Castle cuts a figure as striking as his sinuous pieces, more than 75 of which reside in permanent collections, including the Metropolitan Museum and MoMA in New York, the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and the Victoria and Albert in London. Private collectors, from Malcolm Forbes to Philippe de Montebello to Barry Diller and Diane von Furstenburg, sought out his works, sometimes placing a Castle piece next to a Jeff Koons or an Andy Warhol, while architects, such as Peter Marino, gobbled up editions for their clients. He's revered as a godfather of American Studio Craft, the postwar movement that brought transcendent, often futuristic modernist design into alignment with timeless hands-on skill. He, Wharton Esherick, George Nakashima, and Sam Maloof make up the Mount Rushmore of modern woodworking. Of this big four, only Castle is still around—and still creating pieces that turn the design world on its ear.

On November 6, Castle, a contender for

World's Youngest Octogenarian, will turn 85. The timing is right for a victory lap. In October, Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery will launch "Wendell Castle Remastered," bringing together more than 40 Castle pieces, old and new. Jonathan Binstock, the museum's director, calls the show "a coming home." In another homecoming, the Nelson-Atkins Museum, in Kansas City, Missouri, will mount a major Castle show next June. It was the first museum to display Castle's work, as part of a group exhibition in 1960. "I had the highest-priced piece in the show, at \$1,000," he recalled. "Nobody bought it." That stopped being an issue long ago, which still strikes Castle, with his ingrained midwestern modesty, as mildly astonishing.

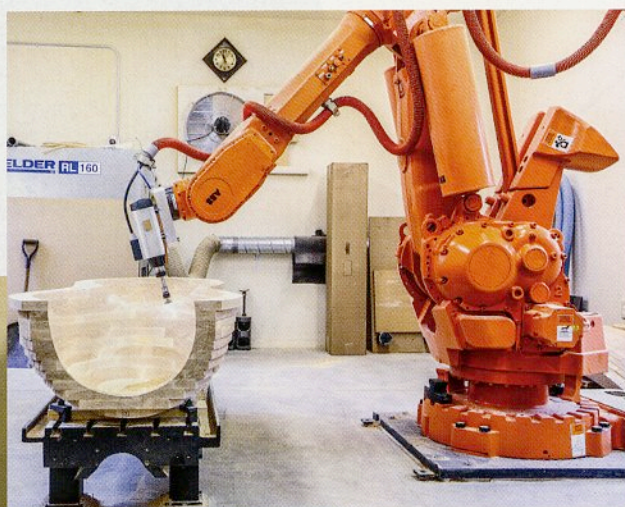
"I'm constantly making things where the chance of selling it seems slim," he said. Fortunately, he added, "I'm often wrong."

Castle is pretty easy to spot as he makes his way around the Brigadoon-like village of Scottsville (population: 1,958). He lives five minutes from the studio, an enviably mellow commute through wooded lanes that Castle often completes in one of his eye-catching vintage automobiles. It could be the 1985 Porsche 911 slantnose turbo, the 1949 MG TC, the 1970 Jaguar XKE, the 1976 Jensen Interceptor convertible (one of only 56 made), or the capacious 1996 Bentley Brooklands. The restoration of a 1951 Nash-Healey two-seater has been a long-running pet project. The day I dropped by the studio, he'd been touching up a pair of 1951 New York license plates to go with it. (He said he's always dreamed of designing a car. Would it be wood? "Fiberglass.") The neighbors turn their heads when he drives by, and the staff at the local diners greet him by name when he walks in for a restorative BLT and root beer.

The cedar-shingled studio, which Castle bought in 1967, is tucked behind a row of trees next to the old Baltimore &

Ohio railroad station, which his wife, the renowned ceramicist Nancy Jurs, uses as her workshop. The studio is like a basement woodshop blown up to Brobdingnagian proportions: room upon room filled with chisels, planes, Stanley Surform rasps (which Castle once proclaimed "the only hand tool of any consequence developed in the last 50 years"), clamps, power tools, and outsize machinery, including a hulking 1940s Tannewitz band saw. Many of these tools have been with Castle for decades. Eggshell-white urethane-foam models—scanned to help create the patterns for the wood layers used in stack lamination—line shelves and lie scattered across worktables. There is a full-scale foam model, known as a "plug," that Castle is busy shaping; it is a mold for a piece to be cast in bronze. A poster of Castle's "10 Adopted Rules of Thumb" hangs on one wall; it includes the oft-quoted "If you hit the bull's eye every time, the target is too near," an unofficial motto.

Castle clocks in around 9:00 A.M. every weekday and knocks off around 6:00; he's been known to work on Sat-



Left: Castle handles a model in his studio in Scottsville, New York, 2014. Above: Castle's IRB 6400R robot, aka Mr. Chips.



Clockwise from center: Scribe's Stool, the piece that put Castle on the map back in 1962; the trompe l'oeil Ghost Clock (1985), from Castle's postmodernist phase, carved from mahogany; the gel-coated, fiberglass-reinforced plastic Molar Chair (1969), an icon of modern design; the stack-laminated Dining Table (1966), which Castle bought back at auction; Long Night (2011), a chair made using the same method in Peruvian walnut.

urdays. The studio, which employs ten people, turns out more than 30 pieces a year; each one takes up to 300 hours to make. Castle begins every project—and most mornings—with pencil sketches. He has no use for computer shortcuts; pages of drawings—vaguely comical, pudgy shapes that might one day find expression in black-stained ash or distressed bronze—tend to accumulate all over the studio.

Born to a Methodist family in Emporia, Kansas, during the Dust Bowl, Castle grew up in a succession of rural towns around the state, including Holton, where he graduated from high school in 1951. Dyslexia hampered his academic progress, but he gravitated toward industrial design at the University of Kansas and, throwing his family for a

loop, decided he wanted to be a sculptor. A grad-school road trip with a buddy led Castle to the doorstep of Alexander Calder in Connecticut (welcoming) and of Wharton Esherick in Pennsylvania (not).

The young man from the Kansas outback went about his work with stubborn I'll-show-you determination, beginning with sculptures evoking Danish modern furniture on peyote (which you could even sit on) and then landing on stack lamination, producing the "biomorphic" forms that made his reputation. Furniture, to Castle, seemed like a more wide-open game than fine art. "I thought, *I can jump right in here and I can be on the top, day one*," he told me. "And I was." In 1966, Castle made it into the pages of *Life*, which quoted him: (continued on page 150)

In Full Command

(continued from page 105)



partnership. He met Arrington while she was in a Chicago production of *King Lear*. They fell in love, moved to New York, and started a family a couple years later.

“Onstage, Michael is shifting from one moment to the next—it’s vital, it’s alive. He has a sense of danger, yet there’s tremendous heart and tenderness. Offstage, he’s incredibly charming, he’s warm, he’s effusive. I just love him.”

—JESSICA LANGE (*Long Day’s Journey into Night*)

Guests start trickling in. On the wall to the left as they walk through the front door is a giant bright-

Form Follows Freedom

(continued from page 137)



“I have no special interest in form following function.” That same year, he appeared on the game show *To Tell the Truth*: “Will the real Wendell Castle please stand up?” One critic referred to Castle’s growing oeuvre as “fantastic functional woodworks.” Another called it “repulsive to look at.” As Castle has said, “I’d think I was doing something wrong if everybody loved it.” Some of his fellow exalted practitioners didn’t. Nakashima, Castle said, supposedly thought he “didn’t respect the wood.” Then and now, Castle has no use for what he has called “the old woodworking mystique.” “As far as I’m concerned,” Castle told me, “he had *too much* respect for the wood.”

Fifty years on, he seems bemused that ques-

red heart. On one side of the space is Sylvie’s “bedroom,” a corner of the room that’s been sectioned off with curtains; on the other is Marion’s. A nearby bathroom has a litter box in the shower and a caricature of Trump as the main villain from the Harry Potter series with a tweet by J. K. Rowling about the president written above it: “How horrible. Voldemort was nowhere near as bad.” The party is further in. It’s Tracy Letts’s birthday, and cake will later be served in his honor. For now, Letts is chatting with Paul Sparks, who acted alongside Shannon in all five seasons of *Boardwalk*. Adults sip the house specialty—Arrington’s spicy margarita—and graze the potluck spread on the dining-room table while a gaggle of children runs from one room to the next. Shannon leans down to Sylvie, who’s playing a board game with her friends, and whispers in her ear. As she giggles, a smile stretches across his face; it’s the most content and unguarded I’ll see him this evening.

When Shannon became a father—or, as he describes it, “when it was thrust upon me”—he felt thoroughly unprepared. Between his unteathered youth and his vagabond adulthood, “I didn’t think parenting was in my skill set,” he says. Before meeting Arrington, he never thought he’d have children at all. “Because of the course our civilization is on, I’d been afraid to bring a human life into it. Some people say, ‘That’s a cop-out. Every generation feels that way.’ For me, it was genuine.”

A few seasons into filming *Boardwalk*

tions like “Are you a sculptor or a furniture maker? An artist or a designer? A conceptualist or a craftsman?” continue to float around him like sawdust. “We live in a world where boundaries are constantly being blurred,” Binstock, the Rochester gallery director, said. “That’s where the culture is. He’s been doing that for a long, long time.”

Castle’s house, a rambling Arts and Crafts affair built in 1905, sits at the end of a dogleg lane; he and Jurs have lived there for 40 years. Surrounded by rolling acreage, the house is a repository of classic Castle pieces, including his iconic whorling 1966 walnut dining table, which he bought back at auction a couple decades ago; last year, a similar one popped up at a design fair, with an asking price of \$600,000. (It sold for an undisclosed amount.) There’s a broad porch full of the eye-popping plastic chairs and tables (perfect for sundown cocktail hour) Castle created in the late 1960s, when he decided to forsake wood altogether in a move comparable to Dylan’s going electric.

He describes this wood-renouncing moment as “a blip” in his career, but it has had an enduring afterlife. It’s impossible to view Castle’s work in wood without thinking of the plastic. The sleek and curving wood pieces, after all, have the fluidity of plastic, while the plastic pieces, as pop as they are, feel handcrafted. *The Molar Chair*, from 1969, is what it sounds like: a vaguely tooth-shaped, gel-coated fiberglass-reinforced plas-

Empire, Shannon faced a personal crisis: Sylvie required emergency surgery. She was okay, though her recovery was long, and Shannon didn’t want to leave her side. But he was contractually obligated to film the show, on which he played a morally corrupt federal-agent-turned-bootlegger. He’d signed on for the series partly because it was shot in and around New York, near his family; instead, it was preventing him from being with them. Besides, he says, “I wasn’t a huge fan of that period of the show. It had already gotten perfunctory.” In that moment, “I never cared less about work in my life,” Shannon says. “I was like, ‘What are my lines? Can I go now?’” He clarifies that he didn’t let his ambivalence get in the way of his performance. “I know how to fake it like any good hooker.”

The experience reassured Shannon that he possessed the tools for parenting. But he learned that being a family man comes at a cost: Doing his job now, he says, is “more angst-ridden, honestly. If I didn’t have a family, I wouldn’t have the gnawing sensation when I’m at work that I’m missing something.”

It’s no surprise that protecting one’s family is a core theme of his favorite film he’s done, Nichols’s *Take Shelter*. Shannon plays a man who foresees the apocalypse. Unsure if he’s prescient or insane, he plows forward with plans to build a bomb shelter in his backyard to safeguard his young daughter and increasingly concerned wife (Chastain). “Jeff was experiencing a lot of the same things as me at that time,” Shannon says. Both he and the

director have young children and a penchant for doomsaying. Nichols says the story germinated from “a free-floating anxiety Mike and I both felt: *What kind of husband and father am I going to be? Am I able to hold the weight the world is going to place on me?*”

mahogany. (The piece is in the Smithsonian.) Given the shifting tides of fashion, won’t these works—now practically airbrushed from the official Wendell Castle history—eventually have their comeback? “I may be gone at that point,” Castle said, “but I’m sort of counting on that actually happening.”

Six years ago, Castle plunked down \$25,000 for a robot, specifically the six-axis IRB 6400R model made by the ABB company. Known around the studio as Mr. Chips, the bright-orange computer-controlled machine was previously employed by the U.S. Postal Service. Mr. Chips has a mechanical arm that can reach 12 feet and came with a 1,000-page user’s manual.

One afternoon in the studio, a technician mounted a stack of ash layers onto a steel tray, got behind a Plexiglas screen, and threw some switches. Mr. Chips was off and running. Its long arm wielded a wandlike tool that milled out the opening for a drawer while wood dust sprayed like confetti. It was a mesmerizing show. Castle stood nearby in his pink canvas Paul Smith wing-tips, studying the machine intently, pleased with its work. (The Memorial Art Gallery show will include new pieces made with Mr. Chips’s help.)

Castle refuses to delegate any of the design process to his mechanical apprentice, but there’s no doubt that Mr. Chips has made an impact, allowing the designer to join complex components

together with unheard-of precision and to more easily execute an edition of eight rather than the customary one-offs. There’s something of David Hockney with his iPad about it all, a continuation of relentless creativity through fresh means. “He was an early bloomer and then a late bloomer,” Marc Benda, cofounder of New York’s Friedman Benda gallery, which represents Castle’s new work, told me. “And he’s still ahead of the curve.”

As the day wound down, Castle showed off some new works, including a chair intended for the Rochester show. It was encased by a huge, off-kilter rectangular frame, to which one of Castle’s craftsmen was, uncharacteristically, applying gold leaf. It was a mischievous flirtation with the ’80s postmodernism he’d long ago abandoned—just enough to keep ’em guessing. “This is going to blow some minds,” Binstock said. Castle pulled out some martini glasses he’s been designing for Corning and mentioned that a PBS film crew was coming to the studio first thing in the morning. There was also an exhibition of ultrarare vintage pieces being ramped up for the R & Company gallery next spring.

As Castle nimbly made his way outside to the top-down Jensen Interceptor, he mused about wanting to zip over to Toys“R”Us to get some G. I. Joes, which might inspire some new designs. How would that fit with what he’s been doing? He thought about it for half a second and smiled. “Who says I have to fit with what I’m doing?”

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Credits

Photographs & Illustrations

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