

# POST

THIS IS ROCHESTER.

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A KIND

Artist  
Wendell  
Castle

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*by Paul Gangarossa*

*photography by John Myers*

It's not something many people know about him, but Wendell Castle—the father of art furniture—plays guitar. Folk guitar to be exact. He began playing in 1962, the same year he began teaching furniture design at the RIT School for American Crafts.

“Ever since I came to Rochester—I didn’t play before that—I started playing guitar,” he explains during a lunch break at his studio. “I had an assistant who was an excellent musician and he taught me. So I’ve spent years now playing and singing, at home and for myself, mostly.”

He studied it. Learned it. Practiced it. Failed at it. Practiced some more. Learned from it. And most importantly, enjoyed it. This, perhaps as much as any piece of furniture he has crafted, says something about the type of person he is: Art is not about the product, it’s about the process.

“There is never a day when I do not feel like at least trying to create art,” he says. “It’s not easy, and some days it’s a struggle, but it’s worth it to me. The excitement of the work in the studio comes close to the ideal fulfillment I imagine we all hope to get from life. It also leaves an outcome that adds to the richness and complexity of our universal experience.”

Gangarossa, Paul. “Wendell Castle: The Quiet Life of a World-Famous Artist,” *POST*, July/August 2016

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It was the encouragement of a college professor who set him on this path to fulfillment.

“During the first semester of my second year in college, I took art as an elective,” he says. “I excelled at something for the first time in my life. The instructor advised me that I should leave that college and attend a school with a better art department. I did.”

Castle ended up studying industrial design and fine arts at the University of Kansas, which eventually led to furniture.

“For reasons I don’t even know, I got interested in furniture work,” Castle says.

Two of his earliest pieces stood out just enough to enter them into a few shows.

“They were about as comfortable as sitting on a fence, but I considered them chairs,” he says.

Attending one of those New York City exhibits was the dean at RIT, who, at that moment, thought it would be a good idea to bring a sculptor into his school’s furniture program.

“I thought I’d stay for a year or two and then get back to New York City,” Castle admits. “I was a reluctant furniture maker; it wasn’t what I wanted to do. But once I came here I began to like furniture more and more ... and I’ve been doing this art furniture since.”

Today, the small-town Kansas native is internationally known and respected for his craft. He has a home in New York City, where his main gallery resides. He has a studio in London, another in Paris, and a third in South Korea. And yet he spends the bulk of his days here in Rochester, in his 15,000-square-foot-studio in Scottsville. At age 84, Castle still often works seven days a week.

“A typical work day for me lasts from about 9 until 6, with me leaving early two days a week to play tennis, year-round,” he says. “I have classical music (WXXI) on most of the time. I live very close to the studio, so I go home for lunch.”





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Not surprisingly, when his grandchildren, Archibald (7) and Arabella (10) visit, they find themselves at work with him.

“I have brought them both to the studio and give them scraps of wood and glue, which they enjoy, but it seems more glue goes on the floor than on the wood,” he says jokingly.



Despite having “made it” Castle will not settle into doing what has worked in the past. He is forever changing, reinventing, and challenging his work and himself. The guitar is a perfect example. Another is his love of tinkering with English sports cars, of which he owns several. Even studio work is treated with an inquisitive approach: How can I do this differently? Or what if I try this?

“To me, it’s magical. It’s just such an important part of my life. Everyday I’m anxious to get the studio. I’m not looking forward to a vacation or anything. I have literally found myself dancing at the studio.”

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## My 10 adopted rules of thumb

1. If you are in love with an idea you are no judge of its beauty or value.
2. It is difficult to see the whole picture when you are inside the frame.
3. After learning the tricks of the trade, don't think you know the trade.
4. We hear and apprehend what we already know.
5. The dog that stays on the porch will find no bones.



6. Never state a problem to yourself in the same terms it was brought to you.
7. If it's off beat or surprising it's probably useful.
8. If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it.
9. Don't get too serious.
10. If you hit the bulls-eye everytime the target is too near.

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