

Memorial Art Gallery opens its 'Crafting Modernism' exhibit

A major MAG exhibit shows how we led the way in mid-century art and design



Scottsville artist Wendell Castle works on a new piece of furniture for one of four upcoming shows he has in the works this year. Castle will also be publishing two new books in 2012. / ANNETTE LEIN/staff photographer

After World War II, western New York became a hub for innovative crafts that inspired artists across the nation. Now their creations have returned [home](#) for a massive exhibit at

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the Memorial Art Gallery. “Crafting Modernism: Midcentury American Art and Design” features work by more than 170 artists, including 20 from western New York.

Most of these local talents taught or studied at Rochester Institute of Technology’s School for American Crafts, the New York State [College](#) of Ceramics at Alfred University or Syracuse University. Some belonged to Shop One (1953-1977), a pioneering Rochester gallery where craftspeople could sell their work directly to customers.

A few of the modernists are still active, such as acclaimed Rochester metal sculptor Albert Paley and Scottsville furniture maker Wendell Castle. Others, like the late RIT metalsmiths Hans Christensen and John Prip, are still familiar names to collectors worldwide.

“It’s no wonder that upstate New York developed such a rich crafts tradition,” says Chiyo Ueyama, exhibitions assistant at the Memorial Art Gallery. “Not many other schools around the country offered these crafts, and RIT was strong in all areas: metal, wood, glass and ceramics.”

All of these media, plus textiles and furniture, are showcased in the new exhibit. One hundred crates arrived last month from the organizer, Manhattan’s Museum of Arts and Design. It took Memorial Art Gallery staff three weeks to install more than 200 artifacts.

“It felt like very carefully controlled chaos,” says Ueyama.

The result is a pleasantly open and spacious display, with each item highlighting an artistic personality or stylistic trend from 1945 to 1969. There’s no chronological order to follow, so you can take a fun-house approach, wandering from one offbeat showpiece to the next.

Young parents will head straight for Sam Maloof’s *Cradle Cabinet*. Lovingly crafted from walnut and brass, it features a handmade cradle and enough storage space for a year’s supply of Huggies. All in all, it would be a desirable item for babies born into the population’s upper one percent.

Visiting CEOs will soon decide they can’t live without Hans Christensen’s sterling silver coffee pot. Its spout curves proudly heavenward, like the prow of a luxury liner. Who knew that a coffee pot could pour out so much [power](#) and sex appeal?

Art-loving fiancées are sure to appreciate Ruth Radakovich’s *Cocktail Ring*. A tiny gold-and-diamond cocktail glass sprouts from its bubbly base — the perfect gift for a party girl.

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Such pieces show the lively imaginations behind the studio craft movement. But in the mid-1940s, powerful social forces were working to take art out of the studio and onto the production line.

When GIs returned home after World War II, they created a boom market for housing and home furnishings. Wartime factories had developed methods of mass production that artists and industrial designers could take advantage of.

“Some artists teamed up with industry to make prototypes for mass production,” says Marlene Hamann-Whitmore, curator of education. “Others made unique works of art in private studios, or produced multiples of their designs with assistants. And several did all of these things.”

Among the artists who did both unique works and industrial designs, Italian-born Arieto Bertoia was exceptionally versatile. The Pennsylvania master produced sculpture, jewelry and commercially successful furniture — all represented in the exhibit.

His ***Bird Lounge Chair and Ottoman*** is a comfortable visual pun. It’s a wing armchair, with arms that actually resemble wings and a back that mimics a bird’s tail. Mass-produced from 1952, it influenced the design of many chairs made today.

Bertoia captured a different “modern” look with his untitled brass and copper sculpture from 1958. Powerful and minimalist, it seems to show a crystal’s inner geometry as captured by an electron microscope.

By contrast, his graceful ***Tree Hair Ornament*** is a functional comb with a delicate sculpture of leafy twigs on top. It looks like the kind of thing Frida Kahlo might have enjoyed wearing when she wasn’t letting her hair down with Diego Rivera.

Closer to home, Castle, too, created one-of-a kind and industrial works. His Icon Design furniture, mass-produced in Le Roy since 1999, entered the market too late to be included in the exhibit. But two limited-edition pieces from the 1960s represent his wide-ranging output.

Music Rack is a curvaceous and whimsical music stand seemingly designed by Dr. Seuss. ***Benny Lamp*** is a fiberglass arch topped by a bright green roller coaster of a neon tube. The exhibit text calls them examples of biomorphism: “Undulating lines and curved forms that mimic nature and the human body.”

Castle, 79, says that he originally made 12 copies of ***Music Rack***, then a few more when celebrity musicians demanded their own.

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“The Guarneri Quartet asked me to make four,” he recalls. “They wanted a shorter stem on top so they could maintain eye contact.”

The *Benny Lamp* belongs to a set of floor lamps that debuted at a Manhattan gallery in 1973. They had cartoon-like designs and cartoon characters’ names: Fat Albert, Sluggo and so on. Not a single one sold.

Castle concedes that they were “slightly unusual” at the time. But so were the avant-garde creations of RIT colleagues such as potter Frans Wildenhain and jeweler Ron Pearson. Their work, like Castle’s, has risen steadily in value.

“It’s very collectible right now,” says Hamann-Whitmore. “It is beautifully designed, easy to live with and mixes well with different styles.”

Another multi-faceted artist was the legendary sculptor Alexander Calder. His elegantly creepy black mobile, *Hanging Spider*, will doubtless lure many visitors into its web. But his brash, intensely colorful painting *Mountain Range* reveals a less familiar side of his output. (He also painted squiggly designs on Braniff Airlines jets, which couldn’t schedule a landing at the museum.)

The exhibit’s best-known living artist arguably is Paley, puzzlingly represented by only a single brooch. He made *Fibula 112* in 1973, when he was a young goldsmith teaching at RIT’s [School](#) for American Crafts.

Delicately crafted from silver, gold and semi-precious stones, it resembles a fairytale moth woman with outspread wings and curled antennae.

“In the spirit of the 1960s, I was trying to break with convention and make a statement about feminism,” says Paley, 68. “Its design is quasi-organic, with a sense of lyricism about it.”

A complete tour of Crafting Modernism could take two to three hours — especially if you stop to ogle the small-scale sculptures and pieces of jewelry.

But before leaving, be sure to see two gigantic and memorably weird doors. Ruth Radakovich’s futuristic, off-white portal is decorated with green lenses that glitter like cabochon gems. The next time the Starship Enterprise gets a renovation, this item deserves to go on board.

Phillip Lloyd Powell’s rough-hewn door is made from jagged chunks of walnut fortified by steel studs. Built to withstand a battering ram, it should appeal to today’s security-conscious homeowners.

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But is it modern or medieval? This is a case where the most avant-garde design touches on art's distant past.

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