



Smithsonian
Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum



OBJECT OF THE DAY



Chest for stereo. Designed and made by Wendell Castle, 1973. Gift of Linda and Irwin R.

Trope, Cynthia. "A work by Wendell Castle", *cooperhewitt.org*, January 15, 2013.

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A Work By Wendell Castle

This chest, by twentieth-century American designer/craftsman Wendell Castle is an outstanding example of the American studio furniture movement. Commissioned as a stereo cabinet, it is a variant of a blanket chest he crafted in 1968 that is now housed in the collection of the Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York.

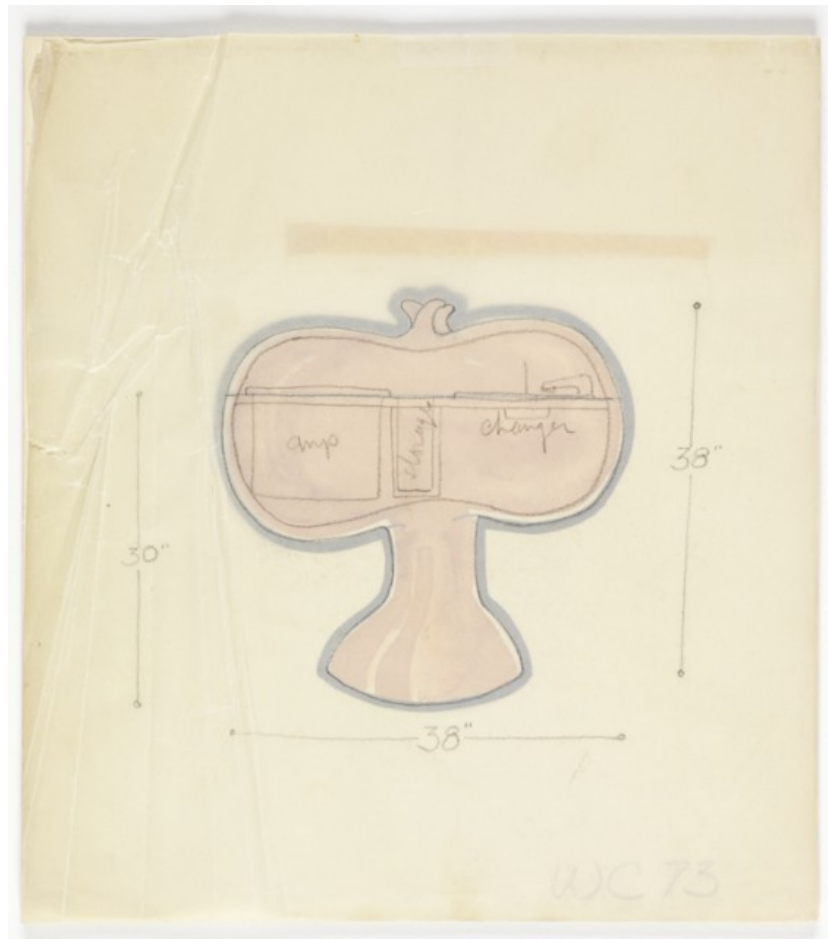
Castle's work is grounded in a sensibility that draws from both the fine arts as well as his training in industrial design, and reflects a diverse and exacting approach. From 1953 to 1961, Castle studied in the Department of Design at the University of Kansas. He also studied with American artist/woodworker Wharton Esherick, who rejected rectilinear furniture construction and considered most postwar wooden furniture to be bland.

Castle made his first pieces of furniture around 1959. By the early 1960s, his reputation as a craft artist was growing. He was able to expand his technical repertoire and aesthetic sensibility while breaking from traditional joinery and rectilinear forms to favor a highly expressive, organic approach to furniture. During this period, and into the early 1970s, Castle developed and refined a stack-laminating technique that had mainly been used in the construction of wooden objects, from nineteenth-century duck decoys to large, modern, abstract sculpture. In this technique, boards, or planks, are stacked and glued together to form a mass, which is then carved into shape.

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Castle developed a variation, as seen in this chest, in which planks were pre-shaped to follow the outline of the final form. To do this, he had to think of the form as a series of cross-sections and make careful calculations so that the planks could be cut closely to fit the outer and inner contours of the form. This made the construction of case pieces particularly challenging. Castle used a band saw to cut planks to the general shape, and then glued them together layer by layer. Finally, he further shaped surfaces, inside and out, with power tools and hand tools. A design drawing of the chest, acquired with the piece, offers a unique view into Castle's design process.



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Wendell Castle remains a major figure in the production of craft-based furniture in a range of materials, including wood, plastic, and metal.

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