

# WSJ. Magazine

The Seductive  
Charm of  
**RACHEL  
WEISZ**

**FALL FASHION ISSUE**

The Battle for Hermès  
Rei Kawakubo Speaks  
Russia Revamps the Bolshoi  
& The New Dress Code

Gordon, Alastair. "Famous Again." *Wall Street Journal*, September 2011.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001  
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760



DESIGN

## FAMOUS, AGAIN

The surprise star of the Design Miami fair was 78-year-old Wendell Castle, who's been honing his craft for 50 years BY ALASTAIR GORDON

**I** WANT TO IMPOSE MY WILL ON THE WOOD," SAYS Wendell Castle without irony, taming a gnarly hunk of Peruvian walnut with a 14-inch chain saw. The artist moves around the wood block in his Scottsville, New York, studio—a former grain mill that he converted into a 15,000-square-foot workspace—rasping and trimming to the whine of the saw's engine, almost as if performing a well-coordinated dance. While he begins with a specific form in mind, Castle "reads" the wood's natural grain and approaches each of his pieces as a process of discovery. "You begin to have a conversation," he says. "Unexpected things might happen as I'm digging into the wood." Despite his silver hair and beard, Castle appears and moves like a much younger man, trim and fit from chopping, carving and shifting heavy slabs of lumber. After he's finished with the chain saw, he picks up a custom spokeshave and begins to shape the wood. "Handmade in England," he says. "Horribly expensive!"

Castle, the founding father of American furniture art, was the most interesting and unexpected story at last December's design fair in Miami. The artist's work was exhibited by three different dealers, and he upstaged most of the hot European designers on show,

remaining the talk throughout the fair. As the focus in the art world shifts away from "flavor of the month" designers, Castle's approach to making objects that are both practical and transcendent, along with the serious credibility he has built up over 50 years, has allowed his work to resonate once again with collectors, dealers, museum curators and general design aficionados.

Although Castle admirers are a burgeoning market, there's not that much of his work available at any given time. Over 100 of his pieces are held in permanent museum collections, thousands in private hands and another 30 in corporate collections. He makes only around 35 pieces a year and it can take four months to complete a single chair. Every work is unique, even his multiples have variations, and he is constantly reinventing himself. "Wendell is today's version of the Renaissance man, someone uniquely creative and an artist who always thinks and makes anew," says Jane Adlin, an associate curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The look and feel of a Castle piece speaks to a naturally sustainable view of the world that the Kansas native has been practicing since the early 1960s—the way he selects his materials and honors them in the

design process. "He's never been a one-hit wonder," says Cindi Strauss, curator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, an institution that holds five Castle works in its permanent collection. "He's had an extralong career but continues to renew himself and hit high points in the depth of idea and craftsmanship, regardless of what material he's working in." (A hands-on master of any given material—in most cases laminated wood—Castle also works in metal, concrete and even molded plastic.) His vintage pieces have lately been commanding unexpectedly high prices at auction. An oak and leather chair recently sold for \$204,000; a 1963 rocking chair sold for \$170,000; and a carved settee went for \$165,000. His new rockers run from \$85,000 to \$130,000, while a limited-edition fiberglass chair goes for \$35,000.

"There's this sense of the past and future meeting in his work," says Carole Hochman, director of Barry Friedman Ltd., a Manhattan-based gallery that represents Castle's contemporary pieces. "Wendell is an American icon, and he has the freedom to do whatever he likes. There's absolutely no self-consciousness." A recent benchlike piece titled "Moby Dick" that was carved from a laminated block of cherry was shown at



COURTESY OF WENDELL CASTLE (WITH OAK AND VINTAGE SEATER). SHERRY GORRISON/CENTURY FORTLENE. ROCKER AND FINISH FLOOR LAMINATE



**EARTHBOUND**, clockwise from left: Wendell Castle in his Scottsville, New York, studio; Castle's "Abilene" rocking chair; "Three-Seater Settee," 1968; shaping an oak piece in his studio, 1969-70; "Pinkie" floor lamp; a fiberglass work in progress; pieces from Castle's contemporary repertoire in his studio.

her gallery. It looks like pure sculpture, but there are two contoured areas for sitting, like a love seat, while the backrest is perforated with holes bored through at various angles. "I like ambiguity and things that are mystical," says Castle.

Collectors often speak of having a personal connection to Castle through his work. "He loves what he does and he does it for himself," says George Lindemann, a private collector who owns more than 20 Castles. "I think he would make furniture even if he never sold it." Lindemann, who is president of the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach, first saw Castle's work 20 years ago at Habatat Galleries in West Palm Beach, and commissioned him to make all of the furniture for his vacation home in Aspen, Colorado, including a large coffee table that took five years to complete and a two-person settee with tear-drop openings and state-of-mind words carved into its walnut surface—"elation," "ecstasy," "pain."

Castle and I go to a restaurant and sit chatting about his work while he sketches on a paper napkin. The drawing looks something like a kidney with lips and legs. He explains that it's a new chair he's just started to think about. "I enjoy going to work every day," he says, sitting up, staring at me through his signature

round spectacles (crafted by Traction Productions of Paris) that make him look like a kindly but eccentric professor—a professor who creates organic chairs that resemble flower petals, lamps like stamen, a three-legged bureau poised like an elegant insect, and tables that appear to float with undulating apertures. "I'm not even interested in vacations, since I'm on vacation all the time," he says, picking slowly at a garden salad.

Castle's early furniture was made with flat surfaces and sinewy, branchlike supports that looked as if the original tree was sprouting new limbs. During the mid '60s he began to look for ways to craft with more volume, and learned to create hollow-bodied furniture after reading a "How-to-Build-a-Decoy-Duck" article in a 1945 issue of *Deltacraft Magazine*. He experimented with "stack lamination," such as a petal-shaped coffee table carved from rosewood with an elliptical opening in the middle (1966) and a blanket chest that resembled a giant garden slug. There were no dados or dovetail joints used. This method allowed for a freer, more fluid approach and opened a whole new world of possibilities. It was during the free-spirited late '60s that Castle really established his reputation. Furniture, architecture and mind-bending

multimedia were all starting to converge and he created one of the most iconic objects of the psychedelic period: "Environments for Contemplation" (1969), a womblike chamber made from laminated oak with a big door and softly padded interior. A single person could climb inside, shut the door and escape, reflecting or just listening to the beating of his heart. It was more like performance, a kind of happening, than a conventional piece of furniture.

"I'm always thinking as I draw," says Castle, who starts each project with a series of sketches. "I try to keep an open mind. What if I do this? What if I do that?" Once he's chosen a shape, he executes a full-scale drawing that he pins to the wall and uses as general reference as he cuts and laminates slabs of wood together, leaving hollow spaces inside. "By the time I start to carve I have the shape firmly in mind," he says. While he shuns mass production, he's recently started to experiment with computer mapping to create cross-sections of more complex forms. He makes a small model from clay or wax and has it digitized. "I'm never going to design directly on the computer," he insists. "I will always work by hand." ♦

*In November, a major exhibition of Castle's work will open at the Carpenter's Workshop Gallery in London.*