

Object of the Month-January 2012
Sheila-Marie Untiedt

Settee
Wendell Castle
1968
Gallery 275
93.9



*Decorative Arts and Utilitarian Objects, Furniture | Stack-laminated
cherry*

Size: 72 x 30 1/4 x 40 in. (182.88 x 76.84 x 101.6 cm)

Creation Place: North America, United States

Culture: North America, United States

Style: 20th century

Credit: Collection Minneapolis Institute of Arts; Gift of the Decorative Arts Council

Accession Number: 93.9

Castle is a defining figure in the American studio furniture movement. After studying sculpture and industrial design at the University of Kansas, Castle taught at the Rochester Institute of Technology and at the State University of New York in

Brockport. In the late 1950s, he developed his Organic Series, whose title refers to both the wood of his furniture and bimorphic form. In this series Castle abandoned traditional furniture methods. Instead, he glued layers of wood into a large block, then shaped the stack with hand and power tools, a subtractive technique more akin to sculpture than to furniture production. Castle made this piece, a rare three-seat settee, using this stack-lamination method. The resulting settee is strong enough to be both functional and sculptural, with a carved base resembling a tree's root system. Castle's later furniture series are equally iconoclastic, including his trompe l'oeil pieces, sculptures of everyday objects made entirely of wood.



Wendell Castle is a very successful furniture designer, manufacturer and artist still working today at the age of 80. He is often credited with being the father of the art furniture movement. He is an artist that creates both "fine" art and also retail furniture for daily use. His extensive retail collection is highlighted at www.wendellcastlecollection.com. His entire range of work is featured on www.wendellcastle.com.

Questions:

When is art "fine" vs. "Craft". What makes out settee and art object to be viewed but never touched as opposed to a chair by the same artist that is in a private home, such as the chair pictured above?

What other examples can you think of museum quality pieces as opposed to craft or daily use? Pottery? Painting?

What makes art at the Edina Art Fair art but not fine art?

Background:

He was born in 1932 in Emporia Kansas. Castle moved to Rochester, New York in 1961 and taught at the School for American Craftsmen. He is currently Artist-in-Residence at the school and maintains his art studio in nearby Scottsville. His works are held by over 45 major museums, various corporate art collections, in addition to private collectors.

Wendell Castle has been a sculptor, designer, and educator for more than four decades. An influential artist, his work has led to the development of handcrafted, modern designer furniture as a major art form and his name is revered above all others in the field.

His bold and graceful pieces, often organic, and sometimes whimsical, are crafted from rare and beautiful hardwoods, plastics, veneers, and metals in a timeless contemporary style. His expression of color and exotic materials are synonymous with the Wendell Castle name.

Internationally lauded for his contributions to the American art and design field, his numerous awards and honors include recognition by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Text from retail website:

In 1998 Wendell founded The Wendell Castle Collection (www.wendellcastlecollection.com) as an avenue to deliver his sculptural vision to a broader audience. Hand-crafted in the workshop created by Wendell Castle, each piece is made by world-class craftsmen and women, and upholds the artistic ideals of Wendell Castle.

Made to satisfy the extremely high quality standards of Mr. Castle, the collection is comprised of his iconic signature work as well as several award winning pieces conceived by his design team and developed under Wendell's guidance. Timeless and contemporary, The Wendell Castle Collection serves the residential, hospitality, and contract markets with the same commitment to excellence that characterizes the man himself. All of the pieces, featuring the finest hardwoods, exotic veneers, and innovative finishes are hand-made in America and available through showrooms in 12 American markets.

Fun Fact about MIA Settee:

From the docents' file, dated 2/26/94 by Judy Neiswander

"When Wendell Castle lectured at the MIA on 2/8/94 I asked him about this settee. He reiterated that he made it for his own home and used it from 1968 to 1979. At that point he gave it, along with two other objects, as a down payment on a house to which he subsequently moved. The seller of the house kept the settee until it was sold to the Institute."

[*Wall Street Journal magazine August 25, 2011*](#)

By ALASTAIR GORDON



Photographs by Ben Hoffmann

Wendell Castle in his Scottsville, New York, studio

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, have allowed his work to resonate once again with collectors, dealers, museum curators and general design aficionados.



*Photograph by Ben Hoffmann
Shaping an oak piece in his studio, 1969-70*

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.



Photograph by Ben Hoffmann

Pieces from Castle's contemporary repertoire in his studio

"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 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.



Photograph by Ben Hoffmann

"Three-Seater Settee," 1968

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.

[YouTube:](#)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a217zL8UjMQ&feature=results_main&playnext=1&list=PL1A00DFF753A0BF16