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Creative Living

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His artistry in furniture melds form and function

As a child growing up in Holton, Kan., Wendell Castle was particularly interested in drawing and model making.

The articulate Castle lectured and wrote frequently about his lamination techniques. Other American artists/craftsmen began to emulate him with the result that lamination became practically synonymous with American handcrafted furniture in the 1970s.

By Joan Boram
special writer

If you haven't seen the Wendell Castle show yet, don't read this article.

Right now, put on your hat and galoshes and make tracks for the Detroit Institute of Arts. Delight in the wonderful, witty creations of sculptor/furniture-maker Wendell Castle. Probably the only furniture you'll ever see that you want to hug or at least stroke.

But keep in mind that Castle is to furniture what a Daimler is to transportation or Fred Astaire to hoofing.

Not that it isn't functional. Castle insists that every piece in the show has been in use right up until the day it entered the current retrospective (his first). Indicating an oak, walnut and birch chest of drawers, made in 1962 as a graduate school project, he said: "A man has kept his underwear in that for years."

It's just that, in an age where "eclectic" is the rallying cry of interior design, Castle's furniture demands its own space. It has presence. These are not ensemble pieces. If you put a Castle piece in a room full of furniture, it won't get up and walk out, the other furniture will just disappear.

There are 41 pieces in the show, arranged in chronological order. The show begins with an Eamesian chair that Castle made for himself because he needed furniture. The "rooted" chest of drawers came from the same period, before he knew he was seriously interested in furniture-making.

CASTLE, WHO HAS a background industrial design and sculpture, was one of the first artists to create a whole body of work using stack-lamination. This means he glued layers of wood together and then carved out the design: These earlier pieces don't have traditional joinery, partly because the lamination made it unnecessary, but also because just he didn't know how.

The articulate Castle lectured and wrote frequently about his lamination techniques. Other craftsmen began to emulate him, with the result that lamination became practically synonymous with American handcrafted furniture in the 1970s.

One of the most sensuous pieces in the show, a graceful desk and chair made from vermillion wood, dates (1965) from this period. The desk has no drawers. Rather, the hinged side pieces on either side lift out to reveal hollowed-out storage areas. The piece illustrates Castle's basic philosophy — that furniture and sculpture can be the same thing.

Castle's wry sense of humor is evident in many of his pieces. One that he is particularly proud of is titled "Ghost (1985)." It looks like a grandfather clock covered with a sheet, but it's a solid block of wood. Castle borrowed an 18th century grandfather clock from an antique store, covered it with a sheet and duplicated every fold and line exactly. A carved "string" gives the piece a waistline. "It fools 100 people out of 100," he said.

Castle's own dining room table (1985) wears gold "earrings" underneath and rests on leather-covered cones. Cones, he explains, are his version of columns, but they are delicate where they support the table and grow enormous at the floor the reverse of traditional table legs. "The earrings. . .are for surprise. I like to put surprises under pieces. It's wonderful to discover things."

THE TOP OF THE TABLE is holly veneer with inalid purplewood triangles. Inset plastic dots, if connected, would spell out "Never complain, never explain." There are extra dots to throw you off if you should decide to connect them.

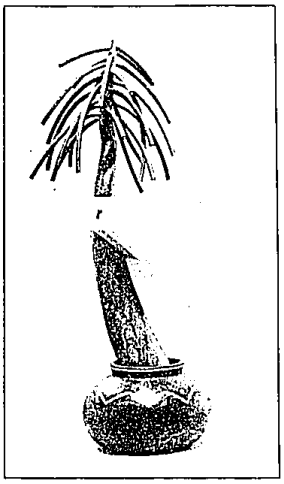
Castle has obviously been told once too often of the connection between Henry Ford II and this particular aphorism. (After all, this is Detroit.) He is quick to point out that The Deuce didn't invent the words, they've been around a long time. In fact, they're his own motto.

You must understand that Castle's work is sensuous, tactile, emotional. Pictures can't convey any of this. No matter how many pictures you've seen, you haven't experienced the real thing. (Think of a still photo of Astaire.) So what are you waiting for?

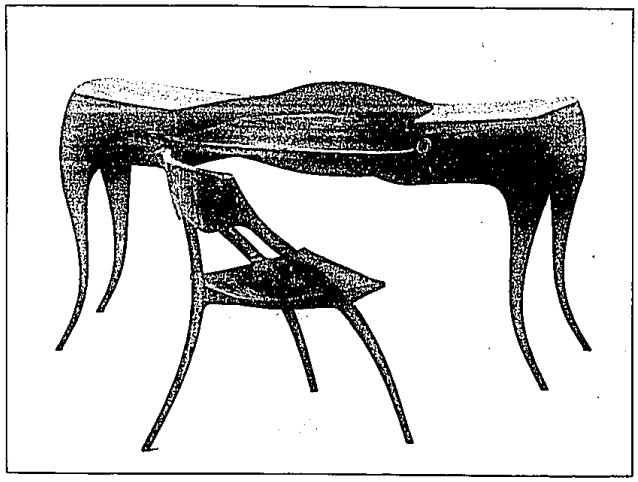
Furniture by Wendell Castle is open to the public without charge from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday (closed Monday and holidays).

There's a famous photograph by Arnold Newman of Piet Mondrian standing in front of a Mondrian painting. Mondrian was a Mondrian — all angles, and kind of stark-looking.

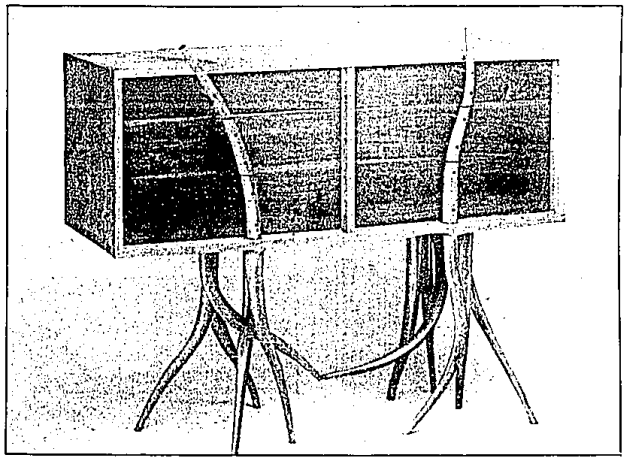
In the same way, Wendell Castle is like Castle furniture — witty, spare, elegant. See for yourself. He will return to Detroit to conduct a walk-through discussion of the exhibition at 3 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 4, the closing day of the show.



Whimsey and art meet in Wendell Castle's 69-inch-high potted rubber tree. It is painted poplar, flakeboard, stained bird's eye maple veneer and rubber.

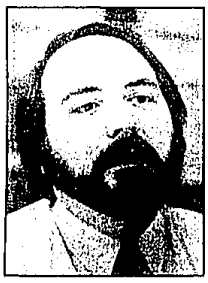


Desk and chair of vermillion, made in 1965, is on loan from private collectors.



Chest of drawers, 1962, is oak, walnut, birch and oak plywood. It is on loan from private collectors.

Historic/modern instrument debate continues



Thomas M. Kuras will conduct a Chamberworks concert, "German Music on the Move," at 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 19, at Bollan Art Center of Troy.

By Thomas M. Kuras
special writer

There is an ongoing controversy about the use of historical instruments (or copies) to perform music of the past.

Some critics immediately dismiss such performances as sterile and arid, unmusical and unexpressive. Others hail any such programs as more accurate and satisfying than performances using modern instruments. The truth, as usual, lies somewhere in between.

The emergence of the long-playing record in the 1950s coincided with the first wave of "historical performance" awareness. The pioneering work of the Dolmetsch Ensemble and especially the revolutionary recordings by the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska made listeners around the globe suddenly aware of a whole new world of sound experiences.

Musicology (itself a product of the 20th century mentality) was out of its infancy and the first fruits of its research shed new light on the origins and urtexts (original readings) of the composers of the 16th-17th centuries. And these findings were radically different from those that generations had grown up with and become accustomed to hearing.

A return to simpler, less complex music (and the rise in popularity of that most basic of instruments, the recorder) must not be isolated from the world of the '50s and '60s. Think of the years of hippies, "flower power," and return to nature that have born fruit today in our consciousness about our environment and food additives.

MERELY PERFORMING on a historical instrument doesn't ensure any closer understanding of the music. But feeling how the instrument responds when playing music dating from the time the instrument was created can yield insights otherwise kept secret to performers.

As wonderful, in purely pianistic terms, as the Bach recordings of Sviatoslav Richter might be, they tell us nothing at all of what the music spoke as Bach himself composed or performed it.

His whole technical-musical performance (enforcing the preeminence of the theme in the various voices) is a direct negation of what Bach knew as a possibility on the harpsichord, and as such, does violence to the basis of the music.

Some counter that it speaks to today's listeners more clearly and forcefully than a dull, sterile performance on the harpsichord would. If they mean that the music can only be appreciated today on the most unsophisticated level, that tells us more about the listeners than the composer and his musical message.

Often the problem is that the listener is uncomfortable with the unknown. Expectations hang heavily in the problem of performance practice. If one goes to a barbecue, formal wear and chicken cordon bleu are out of place. To criticize the serving of hot dogs and hamburgers at such an outdoor event because one was hoping to have veal Parmesan is unfair to the hosts.

Many concert goers hope to hear something other than what is being offered. To compare a Vivaldi concerto with the Beethoven or Brahms concertos is not germane to any musical appreciation.

Can we criticize a performance of a Mozart piano concerto that doesn't stress the "Beethoven" side of the music, the power and drama?

The works of Beethoven are Mozartean in their drama and operatic discourse. They build upon them. Mozart can't reflect forward to a composer yet to come.

BECAUSE THE SOUND of the modern Steinway piano is grand enough in the Rachmaninov or Prokofiev concertos in which the modern (ca. 100 members) orchestra competes against the soloist, does it upset the balance so carefully calculated by one of the greatest composers of western music history by using such a piano for performance of works of the 18th century?

The struggle of a period fortepiano to rise to the level of the orchestra is much more dramatic in a performance using historical instruments. But the musicians must do more than play notes — they must make the music come off the page, to speak vitally to an audience blunted by later works of a much larger scale.

Old or new, go out and hear some live music. Nothing can come close to it for excitement and pleasure.

Editor's note: This is the third and final article by harpsichordist and pianist Thomas A. Kuras, a native Detroiter and Birmingham resident. He is artistic director of Chamberworks, director of music at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Detroit as well as adjudicator, lecturer and master-class instructor with emphasis of the performance of music of the 17th and 18th centuries. He composes instrumental and vocal music.