



Wendell Castle in the spray booth of his New York studio, with 'Black Widow' chair, 2007, in polychromed fibreglass



# WENDELL CASTLE

## Curiosity, playfulness & experimentation

Regarded as the 'Father of Art Furniture', **Wendell Castle** continued to push the boundaries of functional design over four decades, as **Simon Frost** discovers

‘The dog that stays on the porch will find no bones.’ That’s Rule Five of Wendell Castle’s *10 Adopted Rules of Thumb*, published in 1996. Castle left the porch and found bones in the unlikeliest of places.

Born in Kansas in 1932, Wendell Castle struggled in school due to dyslexia. His sole talents, he said, were for ‘drawing and daydreaming, neither of which were valued’. It was precisely these gifts, however, that led to him becoming known as the ‘Father of Art Furniture’. As such, there’s no doubt as to the value of his work – in terms of both its influence on modern design and the eye-watering price his works command on the market today.

### Sculptural design

In part to please his parents, both educators, Castle decided to put his creative talents to use in a respectable way, and enrolled at the University of Kansas to study a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Industrial Design. A brief career upon graduating, however, did little to satisfy his curiosity to experiment with unusual ideas, and he returned swiftly to Kansas to take a Masters in Sculpture.

Castle wanted to be a sculptor, rather than a designer, but he was fascinated by design as well as art, especially in the products coming out of Europe at the time. So, he set about blurring the lines between design and fine art – or, more specifically, furniture and sculpture.

Self taught as a woodworker – his only tuition being a school class – Castle began to experiment with wood. Where traditionally trained makers were joining timber with dovetails, tenons, mitres and the like, Castle largely steered clear of methods that resulted in flat surfaces and right angles from the very start. With little interest for the straight and square, he worked instead at replicating the natural, curvilinear forms that populated his sketchbooks.

That’s not to say he couldn’t cut fine traditional joints, however – Castle was naturally gifted as a maker, easily picking up techniques and executing them to a high level. He created pieces in the late ‘70s that mimicked and played with the traditions of Art Deco and classical Romanesque furniture; some of his work is even reminiscent of African tribal art, with rare pieces featuring exquisitely made dovetails. He could turn his hand, it seemed, to anything.



Unique 'Pedestal' chair, 1967, stack laminated walnut, 902mm long x 845mm wide x 787mm high



'Music Stand', 1964, oak and rosewood, 1,359 x 685mm



This faithfully stack laminated maquette of a Wendell Castle chair was made by Mike Ross while training at Robinson House Studio

**Lamination**

Castle's early works often employed bent laminations to achieve the flowing lines of his sculptural designs. The piece that first caught the eye of the art world was his 1964 music stand, which was selected for the American section of the Milan Triennial – a prestigious international



'Chair with Sport Coat', 1978, carved cherry, 814mm high

exhibition held every three years in the Italian city, and long seen as a bastion of art and design.

An elegant, painterly piece, in laminated oak and rosewood, the music stand is like a piece of modernist sculpture. Its slender, feminine form appears like a simplified human figure holding the music for the player, and a tree holds the music on one of its branches. Castle's approach to the music stand can be seen continually throughout his prolific output – take an everyday object, think about how it could be different, and turn it into a piece of art. 'Never state a problem in the term it was brought to you' is Rule Six, and encapsulates perfectly the way Castle would take the problem that a piece of furniture addresses, and solve it on his own terms.

It was his recollection of a stack-laminated decoy duck seen as a child in a magazine that inspired Castle to experiment with stack lamination; a technique that would allow him to manipulate timber to create some of his most iconic pieces.

Castle built much of his most acclaimed wooden furniture in layers from the ground upwards, each roughly cut to shape, stacked and glued together. He would then cut away at the rough blank with a chainsaw, blending the layers before refining the form further with rotary tools, gouges, and a lot of sanding.



Stack laminated Trompe l'oeil table, 1978, walnut, 1,016mm high x 1,041mm wide x 584mm dia.



'Molar Group' lounge chairs, 1969, gel-coated fibreglass, 952mm wide x 813mm dia. x 648mm high

or rock – there's always a particular part that invites you to sit in it, a dimple or scoop that you're drawn to. And that's precisely how Wendell Castle's chairs work: they don't look like chairs, but you want to sit on them nonetheless.

**Trompe l'oeil**

Like the great artists he looked up to, Castle's career moved through recognisable periods of work, including many iconic and innovative pieces in plastic, the material used to create the majority of his work in the 1970s. These included the instantly recognisable 'Molar' chairs – moulded plastic forms often produced in bright colours that resembled upturned chompers. Rule Nine: 'Don't get too serious'.

Each period of Castle's career broke sharply from what had come before, often with nods to artistic movements of the past. This was especially evident in his 'Trompe-l'oeil' series, which employs the centuries-old tradition of artists using their skill to deceive the viewer, subverting the format of the medium by making a portrait subject appear to climb out of the frame, or creating a seemingly transparent veil in marble over a bust.

Castle had the idea to create such a piece



'Ghost Clock', 1985, hand-carved from a single block of laminated mahogany



'Environment for Contemplation', 1970, containing a small, shag-carpeted crawl space

when teaching a still life drawing class. Having set up an unremarkable dining chair with a jacket hung on the back, he proceeded to draw it himself without distinguishing through shading or weight of line any material difference between the two objects. Looking at his drawing, he wondered if he could replicate this idea in solid form: a chair and jacket as one single object; a side table with a pair of gloves seemingly laid on the surface, but in actuality carved, very realistically, onto the surface. Castle was playing with ways of seeing things.

'If you hit the bulls-eye every time, the target is too near' – that's Rule 10. When he found the trick was too easy to achieve, he decided to end his Trompe-l'oeil series, but not before one last piece: the most striking of them all – 'Ghost Clock'. Castle was drawn to grandfather clocks as items of furniture that aren't used as such, rather just looked at, like sculpture. But would a grandfather clock still be a grandfather clock if you couldn't see the clock face? Does it therefore just become a grandfather?

Castle went on to carve an exquisite piece from mahogany, depicting a grandfather clock.



'Scribe's Stool', 1962 – the piece that put Wendell Castle on the map

Seemingly draped in a white sheet, it was in fact carved from the same piece, then bleached, with a string carved around the 'waist' of the clock to pinch the sheet material and accentuate its features, while suggesting a human presence



'Reaper' rocking chair, 2010, stack laminated and carved walnut, 790 x 1,850 x 1,050mm

to the clock, as he'd done with his music stand. Unlike previous pieces in the series, however, this time he bleached the carved sheet to create the illusion of a distinction between the two elements.

**New ways of seeing**

Over the course of his career, which spanned some 60 years – he sadly passed away on 20 January, 2018 – Castle created thousands of original pieces, most famously in wood and plastic, but also working in metals and even concrete. Unafraid of harnessing technology to help achieve his vision, towards the end of his life he even repurposed a former car assembly line robot. Its job was to carve stacked laminations into exact replicas of scale models, mistakes and all, which Castle had made by hand, replicating his own ideas faithfully at full scale.

Wendell Castle's was a career characterised by a seemingly bottomless well of curiosity, playfulness and experimentation, a desire to present new ways of seeing things that led him to create truly unique work. But how did he do it? Perhaps he put it best in Rule Eight: 'If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it.' ✂



'Chest of Drawers', 1962, oak, walnut, birch and oak plywood, 1,330mm long x 519mm wide x 1,200mm high