

# Wendell Castle

- American, b. 1932 in Emporia, Kansas, d. 2018
- 1958 BFA, 1961 MFA, University of Kansas, Lawrence, four honorary doctorates
- Was based in New York, taught at the School for American Craftsmen, Rochester Institute of Technology

## Body of Work

World-renowned sculptor Wendell Castle made extraordinary contributions to the American furniture art movement. He made sculptural tables, chairs, chests, benches and clocks, many of which were intended to be functional. A catalogue of 1700 artworks he created over 5 decades was published in 2013.

Regardless of size, material, or function, his latest body of work includes forms that are sleek, streamlined, and curved like nose cones or bullets or seed pods. "They're all ellipsoids," Castle said. The three-dimensional form has fascinated the artist since he was a child. When a car in a cartoon was supposed to be moving, he recalls noticing as a youngster, the wheels became elliptical to convey "that leaning-forward, motion look."

Throughout his career, his ideas emerged as he made graphite drawings on paper. "The purpose of a drawing is to generate ideas that become real things, not to make a beautiful drawing," Castle said. "I have no use for computer renderings," he continues. "The computer wants to iron out your lumps and bumps, and I don't want them ironed out. I want it to still have some funkiness, not be too slick." But he did embrace technology to help capture that quirkiness and conserve his time and energy. After Castle rendered the most promising drawings in three dimensions, carving maquettes out of urethane blocks, studio director Marvin Pallischeck swept them with a digital scanner, then printed out a series of blueprints for each successive layer of wood. Once cut, those layers were glued into a single solid form, then sanded, stained and finished – just like Castle's original stack-lamination pieces.

Unlike his early work, which featured exotic wood such as red Gabon ebony, his recent furniture is made of ash. Castle extoled its virtues: long planks with hardly any knots; very hard, thus difficult to cut but durable; color variations that can be evened out with stain; and a pronounced grain that can be accentuated by sanding. "And we're not endangering any rain forests – it grows in our backyard like a weed," he said. "I'm not interested in the wood anymore. I'm interested in the form. And so are my clients."

His works were featured in the 1993 group exhibition *A Kansas Contribution: An Exhibition Celebrating the Year of American Craft* at the former JCCC Gallery of Art, and he participated in Beyond Bounds: Gold Rush. His works are included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Smithsonian Institution, the Wichita Art Museum, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence.



2005, *Two Chairs and a Lamp*, graphite on paper with gilded Jelutong frame

## Wendell Castle – Progression

*Flash Point*, 2016  
Stained ash



*Lost in the Woods*, 2017  
Stained ash



*Hornet's Nest Model*, 2016  
Urethane signfoam with white paint



*Gathering Strength Model*, 2014  
Urethane signfoam with white paint

*Lost in the Woods Model*, 2017  
Urethane signfoam with white paint

*Howling Wolf Model*, 2016 (maquette for *Flash Point* reversed)  
Urethane signfoam with white paint



*Fallen and Risen Model*, 2016  
Urethane signfoam

*Within Model*, 2016  
Urethane signfoam with white paint



*Hope Model*, 2015  
Urethane signfoam with white paint

*Veiled in a Dream Model*, 2014  
Urethane signfoam with white paint

*There is Stillness Model*, 2016  
Urethane signfoam with white paint

*Never Grow Old Model*, 2014  
Urethane signfoam with white paint



*Dante's Heaven Model*, 2017  
Urethane signfoam with white paint

*Double Trouble Model*, 2016  
Urethane signfoam with white paint

*Fearless Model*, n.d.  
Urethane signfoam with white paint



*Awakening Model*, 2017  
Urethane signfoam with white paint

*Second City Model*, 2017  
Urethane signfoam with white paint

*Progression* explores the working process of world renowned artist Wendell Castle. The exhibition celebrates Castle's techniques which he honed throughout his over 60-year career. Featuring 15 maquettes and two fully realized works in wood, the exhibit enhances the typical museum experience by foregrounding not finished works but an earlier phase of their creation.

Organized in concert with the Nelson- Atkins Museum of Art's exhibition *Wendell Castle – Shifting Vocabularies* (June 23 – Jan 20, 2019) the two shows celebrate the legacy of an iconic Kansas artist. The Nelson exhibition features five large works, as well as four sited on the lawn of the Donald J. Hall Sculpture Park. These shows represent the first collaborative exhibition venture between the Nelson and the Nerman Museum. Following Wendell Castle's shows, the two institutions will jointly celebrate another Kansas legend: Wilbur Niewald.

Throughout his long career, Wendell Castle's designs emerged initially as drawings, utilizing graphite on 100 percent rag paper. According to Castle, "The purpose of my drawing is to generate ideas that become real things, not to make a beautiful drawing." The most promising drawings were rendered in three dimensions, with the artist carving maquettes out of urethane blocks and then painting them. The fifteen maquettes on view here served as prototypes for fully realized works (two of which are exhibited in the museum lobby). The maquettes in *Progression* were integral to Castle's studio practice; at the same time, they exert a unique beauty and presence of their own.

As Castle stated, "My drawings and models are the slenderest of help. I may scrap them all. I invent, distort, deform, inflate, exaggerate, compound and confuse as I see fit. I obey only my own instincts, which often I do not understand myself. I often draw things I do not understand, but am secure in the knowledge that they may at some point become clear and meaningful. I have faith in myself. I have had to learn to think, feel and see in my own way, which can be the hardest thing in the world. Whatever progress there is in art, comes not from adaptation, but through daring."

Widely regarded as the most important post-war American furniture designer, Wendell Castle defied categorization. His pieces are at once sculpture design and furniture. Trained as an industrial designer and a sculptor, Castle was part of what was known as the American Studio Craft Movement, following World War II. He pioneered the use of laminated wood (gluing thin layers of wood together) for sculpting. Castle later embraced developing technologies, such as 3-D modeling and computer-guided lathes, routers and milling machines.

A pencil, however, remained his favorite tool. Castle's drawings morphed into carved foam models (shown here) which were subsequently laser-scanned by computer, sculpted in slices by a massive machine, and then finished with hand tools (chisels, sanders, etc.). "I already have way more ideas than I'll ever be able to do in my lifetime," he told the *New York Times* in 1989. "For me the enjoyment is seeing them realized not having to have my hands on every part of it."

JCCC first exhibited Wendell Castle's works in our former Gallery of Art during the summer of 1993. The exhibition, *A Kansas Contribution: an Exhibition Celebrating the Year of American Craft*, introduced Kansas City audiences to Castle's extraordinary "Angel Chairs" as well as *Dr. Caligari's Mistress' Desk*. Castle's organic sensuous, outlandish, and beautiful forms have been realized in wood, plastic, metal, bronze, and concrete. As he once remarked, "There were people making handmade furniture, and they were making it well, but it was based in tradition. I thought there ought to be a place for sculptural furniture. People who made furniture and one-offs, exhibiting it as art — nobody was doing that."

Why does he use pencil and paper?

How does he use computers?

What is Mr. Chips?

How does this relate to furniture?

