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Wendell Castle, whose art was furniture and furniture was art, dies at 85

By Emily Langer
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Wendell Castle, an artist known as the father of art furniture whose masterworks were exhibited in preeminent museums of the United States but were also objects to be sat or eaten upon, or to hold a raincoat and hat, died Jan. 20 at his home in Scottsville, N.Y. He was 85.

The cause was leukemia, said his wife, Nancy Jurs, who is also an artist.

Over more than a half-century, Mr. Castle helped establish a creative genre, the studio crafts, that blended furniture-making and sculpture. He was a designer whose chairs, tables and coat racks were works of art, and an artist whose oeuvre could be used as well as admired.

“There is no hierarchy in art,” he once told *The Washington Post*. “Work is either good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, but it isn’t lessened by being useful.”

His pieces were displayed in institutions that included the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Smithsonian Institution’s Renwick Gallery in Washington and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. They also appeared in the homes of patrons who could afford Mr. Castle’s price tags, which reached into the tens of thousands of dollars.

His works defied expectations for both furniture and art, as well as for the very wood they were made from. Rarely did his pieces include the right angles created by joinery

usually employed by carpenters. He favored curves so sumptuous that they could look, at first glance, as if they were molded from clay rather than carved from wood.

To achieve his signature look, he perfected a technique called stack lamination, which he had learned as a boy entranced by model airplanes. Layers of wood were glued together into a block that he then carved like a piece of stone.

The method yielded works such as the cherry “ ‘Two-Seater’ Settee” (1973), housed at the Met, that resembles two soft, cupped hands much more than it does a wooden bench.

Other works, such as his noted series of “molar” chairs fashioned from plastic and designed to resemble the back teeth used for grinding, did not look, Mr. Castle once conceded to *Newsday*, “particularly sitable.” But it was also true, he remarked, that “the test is not if it’s comfortable after a few minutes but after two hours.”

He created from oak and rosewood a music stand that had the bearing of a praying mantis and “angel chairs” that appeared to have wings. His streak of whimsy burst forth in works such as the wearable wooden bow tie that he carved for a client and the works of trompe l’oeil, or optical illusion, that became a subset of his art.

He carved umbrella stands — complete with wooden umbrellas resting in them. “Table With Gloves and Keys” (1980), crafted from mahogany and housed at the Philadelphia museum, was a traditional half-round table, completely ordinary (if exquisite) except for the set of keys and pair of gloves, half falling off the edge, that were also carved from wood.

Perhaps best known in this category of his work was “Ghost Clock” (1985) at the Renwick Gallery. “What appears to be a grandfather clock draped in white cloth is actually a trompe l’oeil work of art constructed from laminated and bleached Honduras mahogany,” reads a description on the museum’s website.

“It is a gentle reminder to look closer, that things are not always as they seem, for the visual language does not always so neatly reveal its intentions,” curator Nora Atkinson wrote in the volume “Craft for a Modern World: The Renwick Gallery Collection.”

Wendell Keith Castle was born in Emporia, Kan., on Nov. 6, 1932. His parents were schoolteachers, his wife said.

Growing up, Mr. Castle contended with dyslexia, as well as his parents’ expectations for his career. He was studying engineering at the University of Kansas when he took a drawing course and discovered his calling.

He received a bachelor's degree in industrial design – a compromise with his parents between art and fields they considered more practical — in 1958, and three years later received a master of fine arts degree in sculpture, also from Kansas.

Early on, he saw the nexus between craftsmanship and art. He recalled a professor who, upon noticing that Mr. Castle was making his own tool chest, chastised him for squandering time on furniture. “You should be making art,” the professor said.

“I began to wonder,” Mr. Castle told the New York Times, “why can't furniture be art?”

Mr. Castle was still a student when he successfully entered a chair into an art competition. He moved to New York and taught at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he long remained an artist in residence.

In the latter years of his career, Mr. Castle employed in his design work a robot he dubbed “Mr. Chips.”

Mr. Castle's marriage to Joyce Malicky Castle ended in divorce. Survivors include his wife of 46 years, Nancy Jurs of Scottsville; a daughter from his second marriage, Alison Castle of Brooklyn; a stepson, Bryon Jurs of Scottsville; a brother; a sister; and two grandchildren.

Mr. Castle's work could be amusing as well as bemusing, and at times confounding. A Smithsonian tribute to him recounted an incident in which a museum visitor who had come to view “Ghost Clock” demanded to speak with the Renwick's director. When he arrived, she angrily complained that the piece was “still unceremoniously covered by a sheet, cinched neatly around the middle with a piece of twine, as it had been the last time, and the time before, and the time before that,” Atkinson wrote.

Obligingly, the director produced a pair of gloves for her and invited the woman to raise what she had taken to be a cloth so that she might see the grandfather clock beneath.

“When she realized that the cloth was wood and the clock she was expecting underneath did not exist, she returned the gloves,” the tribute reads, “and proceeded to make her way down the Renwick's grand staircase until she reached the exit.”