

: Untapped

What Living With Wendell Castle's Furniture Feels Like

The late craftsman's daughter, Alison, reflects on her childhood home.

By Alison Castle
As told to Tiffany Jow



Wendell Castle's home, in the 1970s.
(Courtesy of Wendell Castle and Friedman Benda)

By Alison Castle, as told to Tiffany Jow, "What Living with Wendell Castle's Furniture Feels Like," *Untapped*, September 25, 2026.

A few years ago, Alison Castle was looking through a scrapbook that her mother, the ceramist Nancy Jurs, made in 1980 as a birthday gift for her father, Wendell Castle (1932–2018), one of the first American designers to challenge the boundary between function and fine art.

Inside the book were press clippings of Wendell's work that Jurs had gathered over the years. A series of Technicolor photographs depicting the family's living room, circa 1973—filled with Wendell's sculpted furniture in wood and neon plastic, and Jurs's earth-tone tableware—caught Alison's eye. Nostalgia took hold: She hadn't remembered the objects in this space but, once she saw the pictures, the feelings of comfort and ease it had once evoked came rushing back.

She eventually traced the images to a feature in *House Beautiful* magazine, and used them to curate "Wendell Castle: Living" (through October 17), an exhibition at New York's Friedman Benda gallery informed by the domestic interior.

Some might see it as a time capsule of American life, showing how two prominent artists merged work and life some 50 years ago. Others, like me (once I got over the shock of seeing Wendell's work in a context other than a white box or his workshop), see it as a space that elicits more questions than it answers: Why did he live with his work? What did it feel like to use these things every day? Is the experience, not just the function, of Wendell's furniture a major part of his design process that we've overlooked?

I recently spoke with Alison to find out. This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.



A spread from the 1973 *House Beautiful* feature on Castle and Jurs's home.
(Courtesy Friedman Benda and Wendell Castle Inc.)

By Alison Castle, as told to Tiffany Jow, "What Living with Wendell Castle's Furniture Feels Like," *Untapped*, September 25, 2026.

“Lounging was not a thing that was valued in our home. My parents were always moving, always creating. My dad loved to work. Though it wasn’t work for him: He was so passionate about what he was doing.

I don’t want anyone to get the impression that our house was a rigid or uncomfortable place. That’s not true. In the evening my mom and dad would relax, but there weren’t a lot of places to laze around. That’s just indicative of the way they were.

However unconventional our furniture was, I loved being with it. That was part of the experience of living in that house. I have wonderful memories of a piece called ‘Environment for Contemplation’ (1970). I’d go in, close the door, and be in total darkness with a very direct shaft of light that streamed down the middle (there’s a hole at the top of the structure, about the size of a dinner plate). Sheepskin lined the interior, muffling sounds from the outside. It’s soft. It’s quiet. It’s perfect for contemplation. Sitting in there was such an exciting thing for me to do.

My parents loved to entertain. They’d often have a bunch of people around the dining table, and a lot of them were artists whose work you can see around. They used their home and the objects in it to bring people together.

Why did we live with the things my parents made? I think there are a few reasons: My mom was making pots all the time, and wasn’t able to sell everything. She’d put the extras in the house. And my father would have pieces that were rejected or unsold in gallery shows that would then live in our home for a while.

It was also practical: Being able to make furniture and pottery for your home is a big part of what you need to live there. For example, my parents were really into card games. My dad made me a little wooden holder with grooves that I could put the cards in, because I couldn’t hold them in my [too-small] hands. I presume he made that in response to that need.

Back then, he did two kinds of work: work he made for himself and work he made for commissions, which supplemented his teaching salary. Somebody might say, ‘I want a dresser.’ He’d make the dresser, and try to have fun with it, but it really had to be a dresser. It had to be usable. If he made a dining table or a chair, it followed the same principle. These were purpose-built things for people to put into their homes and lives, and he thought about the usability and comfort factor in all of them.

For the more ambitious pieces, the ones that sprang from his imagination, you could still use them, but I don’t believe he worried about that much. These were art objects that he wanted someone to be able to use.

But his vocabulary—a visual, almost narrative vocabulary—carried over into everything he did. He never [took the easy way out]. He always put great effort into making things, pushing boundaries while making sure they were part of the same family of pieces; he didn’t get so

ridiculous that they were unrecognizable. He made a couple of stools early on ['Stool Sculpture,' (1959); 'Scribe Stool' (1961–1962)] that did not look like you could sit on them, but usually, you can tell there's a sitting spot on each piece. Even if it had a huge thing around it and something else coming out of it, it was still a chair.

What did he learn from living with his work? He definitely learned what *not* to do. I spent years filming him for a documentary that'll hopefully wrap up soon. I remember shooting him in these outdoor chairs, models made in foam to be later cast in bronze. He'd made a little channel on the seat for water to come out of. I filmed him as he tested the chairs' drainage: water pooled up inside them.

He once built a dining table that was connected to the ceiling. There was a huge, beautiful opening in the middle with these tree branch-like arms that reached up and attached to the ceiling, like legs. It suffered bad delamination—which makes sense: gravity. He was always looking for creative ways to do furniture differently.



Installation view of "Wendell Castle: Living" at Friedman Benda. (Courtesy Friedman Benda and Wendell Castle Inc. Photo: Izzy Leung)

To me, the number one criteria for a successful home is that it's one you feel comfortable in and that you actually use. When I look through interior design magazines, I often see rooms that look like no one ever goes into them, chairs that nobody sits in. Rooms that are designed to look like they do in those glossy pages, all the time.

I've been to people's houses—people who have grand houses—who have rooms like that. They never hang out there. They always hang out in some back room, where there's a comfortable couch and a TV. That's a real shame. What a concept, right? It's really important to me that rooms in a home are *experienced*, and aren't just for show.

I love when a person's living room is where they actually live. That's when a room becomes wonderful: when it's filled with special pieces that you feel represent yourself, that you feel comfortable in, and that you like to spend time in. That's the trifecta. That's home."

Watch Alison Castle talk with interior designer Julie Hillman and Untapped's editor-in-chief, Tiffany Jow, about the ideas in "Wendell Castle: Living" on Friedman Benda's YouTube Channel.