

FURNITURE STUDIO

The Meaning of Craft



THE FURNITURE SOCIETY



Robert Kuo
Fluted Entry Table
Repoussé copper
30" H x 42" Dia.

Craft and the Designer

What is the value of craftsmanship in manufactured furniture?

by Robert Griffith

When considering the value of furniture, most people would agree that well-crafted furniture offers higher value than designed products that do not reveal craft values. If this is true, then what can be said for furniture that clearly displays a craft process or look? For this discussion, we must recognize that a craft aesthetic and culture exists, and also that designers who make a significant case for craft may nonetheless operate completely outside of this craft culture. The studio craft practitioner (or studio designer) represents a kind of bridge between the culture of craft and the practice of product design.

Some may argue that the role of craft in industrial design has diminished in recent times, giving way to style or, in the worst case, novelty. Contrary to this view, studio designers and new venues for the production and sale of their work have emerged. The tradition of handwork, which continues in pockets of offshore cultures, provides opportunities for the manufacture of luxury goods with a high craft component. The marketplace increasingly recognizes the value of handwork and craft in such products.

Any consideration of the value of craft would benefit from distinguishing between the "collector"

and the “consumer.” To the collector, the quality and provenance of the craft object is paramount, whereas to the consumer, quality is one of a number of highly valued considerations in the acquisition of goods; other considerations would include price, color, availability, and delivery time. It is additionally useful to distinguish between furniture and other goods in analyzing and evaluating the components of value. What can be said in support of craft in furniture production may be applied to other industries; however, it is important to recognize that the jewelry and garment industries (for example) operate within completely different parameters for production and sales, not to mention the creation and development of products.

Robert Kuo: Craft in collaboration with industry

Designers who engage craftsmen in collaboration with industry may reflect a craft aesthetic. Such designers may find a home with companies that support special or limited editions. Robert Kuo’s collections for McGuire, for example, distinguish this designer and support the case for handwork as value-adding luxury. This studio designer’s work is heavily influenced by Chinese furniture tradition and culture, as well as by the craft skills available to him in Chinese workshops. Kuo explains, “I work with artisans who have the traditional skills but since my designs are the way they are, it is pushing the boundaries of what they are accustomed to.”¹ In addition to the designer’s collaboration with McGuire, Kuo’s California-based studio develops and markets furniture products that are available directly from the designer’s studio. Kuo’s work represents a diverse form of craft practice for American furniture companies.

Kuo, whose craft training originated in the cloisonné studio of his father, marries traditional



Robert Kuo

Robert Griffith: Atelier

My own design practice has reaffirmed my instincts and intuition regarding creativity and the assigned value of craft. My education in the business began in 1997 with gallery and museum shows of one-of-a-kind furniture. In 2001 I founded my own design and product development company with my industry partner, Kent Harris. In 2002, we were able to introduce The Atelier Collection at Highpoint International Furniture market. The collection reflected the craft aesthetic I had practiced and presented over the previous thirty years. The designs themselves emerged in a fluid and natural continuum. Learning the business and knowing which business I was in, however, was an entirely different matter.

Part of my strategy is to design products based on the existing capabilities of the staff and physical plant of the companies I am associated with. This streamlined the design process, with prototypes initially being built through my partner’s fabrication business. I was fortunate to find partners in industry who were eager to adapt my craft aesthetic and to develop new strategies for marketing the work. My background as a metalsmith and artist contributed greatly to developing products with manufacturing personnel. Successful partnerships can offer sharing of responsibilities as well as a sounding board for ideas.

In the beginning, less than 10% of my time had anything to do with creativity. This can be a pitfall for any designer. It has taken determination and discipline to find the balance between keeping the train on track and focusing on where it is headed. Knowing what is required to support the production of designs is always an issue. Questions arise: What are the risks? Will I be satisfied with the level of control over my designs in exchange for royalties? Am I best suited to determining my own place and level of production?

It has been important to me to be as aware as possible, to be curious as a creative person, and to employ a paradigm based on inquiry. Being informed and in touch is paramount.

Robert Griffith is a studio designer and professor of art at Marywood University in Pennsylvania.



Robert Griffith
Caress Light
Tubular steel, paper
72" H x 20" W x 12" D
Photo: Lisa Hinkle



Robert Kuo

left: Pebble Bench Table
Black lacquer and copper
repoussé on wood
50" W x 18" D x 16" H

below: Cloud Small Cabinet
Carved wood, lacquer
27" H x 32" W x 22" D



technique to a highly refined aesthetic. His aesthetic is supported by production at independent studios in China. "I design the pieces and assign the different studios the work. Different studios have different specialties. One studio is very good at the leaf design, another one does all of the fluted design, another works with the wood grain design. The more familiar the studio is with the design, the faster and more consistent the work." Working this way, Kuo finds that the design process can be long and difficult. "I don't design with other people. Sometimes it takes one and a half years before a first piece is completed because it is a process. Either technical issues or a design issue, the development process is long." By working the way he does, Kuo pays homage to Chinese culture through masterfully crafted individual pieces and is helping to keep centuries-old craft practice alive. This is, in fact, a mission for Kuo, whose familiarity and expertise with antiquities provides direction and meaning for the work. Kuo's work challenges

our perceptions of China as a monolithic manufacturing giant.

In Kuo's case, products involving coats of lacquer applied over a period up to 32 weeks present new considerations for the value of craft and its contribution to the end product. These products are very much the outcome of the designer's own studio practice. The cloisonné enameling, repoussé, and lacquer work involved in the production of Kuo designs demonstrate the value of craft through sophisticated form and finish. For Robert Kuo, handwork is the "ultimate luxury."

Hans Wegner: Industrialized craftsmanship

The influence of the Chinese furniture-making tradition is not limited to Chinese designers. Hans Wegner, the well-known mid-century Scandinavian designer, demonstrated an appreciation for Chinese antiquities through his designs of the 1940s and 50s, notably *The Chinese Chair (No. 1)* of 1940. Wegner, who began his career as a carpenter's apprentice, went on to work with Danish furniture companies who manufactured and marketed his designs on a royalty basis. Later in life, Wegner's designs would come to define the "modern chair."

The Chinese Chair greatly



Hans Wegner

Photo courtesy Carl Hansen & Son

influenced Wegner's *Wishbone Chair*, developed in 1950, and to this day is continued in production by Carl Hansen & Son in Denmark.

In 1950, Wegner's *Round Chair*, featured on the cover of *Interiors* magazine, not only contributed to his fame but also helped to define what we now know as "Danish Design." Of the five companies that produced Wegner designs in the mid-1950s, Carl Hansen & Son is now the principal manufacturer of selected designs. The company has manufactured vintage Wegner designs for half a century, including the *Elbow Chair*, next page, recently re-introduced at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York.

Wegner's designs, which demonstrate a restraint of design elements and absence of decoration, helped to bring international appreciation for "functionalism as ideology" and later as a "style." Wegner has been quoted as saying, "The best in Danish design is not a style or a fashionable trend but a work method for solving functional problems—with style."²

Wegner's genius and creativity emerged through a deliberate analytical process which paired craft with industry. Wegner's understanding of wood technology allowed designs to move forward in

Hans J. Wegner
Y Chair (1950)
Photo: Soren Hansen



Hans J. Wegner
Three-Legged Chair (1963)
Photo: Soren Hansen

collaboration with the craftsmen in the Hansen workshop. In the Jens Bernsen book on Wegner, the author refers to the process of producing Wegner's designs as "industrialized craftsmanship." With assembly done by hand and attention paid to all the aspects of creating a highly crafted product of quality, the manufacture of Wegner's designs preserves the value of Scandinavian craft, not to mention "style."²

Wegner products reflect the designer's reverence for wood: "Love of wood is something that all mankind has in common. Regardless of where people come from, they cannot stop themselves from letting their hands stroke a piece of wood, hold it, sniff it, and experience the material." Like the architect who exposes the bones of a building to be experienced as a design element, Wegner's joinery process is evident in the overall design. The visible joinery emphasizes the craft behind the chair. It implies quality applied by a master craftsman. Wegner's practice and application of craft contributes greatly to the overall value of the piece. In addition, it provides pedigree and promotes a lineage of craft practice in collaboration with industry.

When properly promoted, the presence of craft practiced in the design and development of furniture products becomes a valuable sales tool. Sales to the consumer have always required an educational process. Furniture companies who



Hans J. Wegner
Elbow Chair (1956)
Photo: Soren Hansen

represent work by designers who practice craft recognize that craft is integrated into the product from concept to marketplace: craft is not an element that can be added on. It is a quality issue and one that must be factored into the cost of production, and ultimately, in the price paid by the consumer. After establishing the case for quality and reverence for material, in the example of Hans Wegner and Robert Kuo, a “timelessness” for design emerges. With goals of longevity built into the process of manufacture and presentation to the consumer, these designs present a strong case for the visibility of craft as the hallmark of quality in furniture.

Mid-century Modern

Mid-century furniture, which appears at auction, on the Internet, and in specialty showrooms, offers collectors and interior designers opportunities to acquire important, well-crafted work by iconic 20th-century designers. Gallery showrooms are increasingly presenting Modernist and

contemporary furniture in the form of limited editions by designers alongside carefully selected vintage pieces. Gallerie Kreo in Paris deals exclusively with commissioned and limited edition work. In The New York Times’s *Style* magazine, design editor Pilar Viladas describes this market as “hotter.”³

At New York’s R Twentieth Century Design the showroom clientele are provided with extraordinary examples of mid-century design through featured exhibitions. These exhibitions are often presented as installations, with furniture and other products in their original environments. The showroom is transformed into a setting that showcases the work in the best possible manner. This venue for design presents work of the well-known, alongside designers who had experienced little recognition in their lifetime. Co-owner Evan Snyderman makes the case for craft in the equation of quality and value. “People want quality now,”⁴ Snyderman said. Documentation regarding authenticity, provenance, and the why, when, and where related to the designer is important. Rarity also factors into the price. The research required to provide this service to customers has become a hallmark of the company. But what is striking is that the clientele for vintage and contemporary furniture, according to Snyderman, “is people who are furnishing a home, not necessarily collectors.”

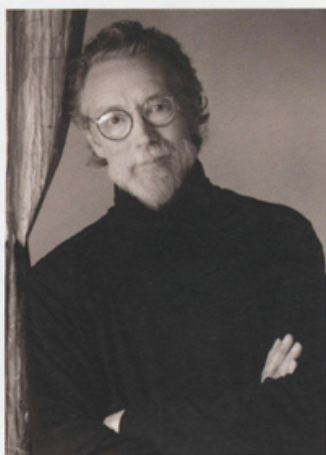
“Getting people to believe in what you are doing is part of the challenge. You have to be a chameleon, set trends, and stay ahead of the game,” Snyderman explained. The gallery brings the worlds of craft and design together on the same plane to complement each other. Snyderman also notes that “things move more quickly today.” Accessibility and delivery time looms large. Agents of design must be poised to respond quickly and effectively to customers. To facilitate this, R Twentieth Century Design holds an inventory and performs restoration (when required) in their Brooklyn warehouse. This form of service to the customer is important in keeping ahead.

In the climate of the post-9/11 marketplace for furnishings designed and created by studio practitioners, collectors of craftwork re-examined their return on investments of all sorts. As expressed by Evan Snyderman, “The community of craft collectors is not regenerating itself.... If the craft world does not embrace the new young collectors, its future does not look good. A time for craft designers to reinvent themselves is at hand. The opportunity for craft to be accepted as a viable form of art and design remains strong.”

Wendell Castle: Strategies for keeping the edge sharp

In 2004, R Twentieth Century Design presented “Autoplastic,” an exhibition of fiberglass work that designer and artist Wendell Castle created between 1968 and 1973. In 2006 the gallery presented another vintage collection of signed and numbered limited editions entitled the “Wendell Castle Black Edition.” Presentations like these help establish the artist in the public eye. The gallery also networks with other galleries in New York to coordinate simultaneous events featuring the same artists. This contributes to the credibility of the work and ultimately its value.

Castle, who is widely recognized for his mastery in wood, has embraced other materials, including plastic and metal, in a continuum of creativity, productivity, and enterprise which began in the early 1960s. In the *Autoplastic* exhibition catalog essay by Donald Albrecht, the artist is credited with the statement that “one must not be subservient to materials—aesthetics should be preeminent.”⁵ Albrecht describes Castle’s *Molar Group* dental shapes “as showing the influence of the early 1970s neo-surrealism.” It is this group, consisting of four works, that was “re-introduced” using the original



Wendell Castle

molds in gloss black by Castle and R Twentieth Century Design. Albrecht additionally quotes Castle: “The significant thing about my work is not what it is made of but what it is.”

In addition to producing “one-off” gallery work and signed limited editions, Castle helped found the manufacturing company Icon in 2000. He acknowledges that this endeavor and building the associated collection is a “difficult and complex subject.” The Wendell Castle Collection introduced at the International Contemporary Furniture



Wendell Castle
Molar Settee

Fair by Icon has taken the path of residential contract furniture primarily targeted to architects and interior designers. Castle explained, “In the contract market you generally don’t make anything until it’s sold and you don’t have to keep inventory.”⁶ When considering the decision to start the Icon manufacturing facility in Rochester, NY, the ability to have control with the knowledge that the work would be done properly was important to Castle. The marketing side has turned out to be “difficult and expensive,” he said. “Now we are trying to get a little more feedback from the showrooms on what people might buy before we go

ahead with something.” Castle emphasizes custom options offered on wood species and finishes. Delivery remains a factor in having an edge over offshore manufacturers. “Often, delivery time is more important than price. The competitive edge you have is doing custom work and delivering it quickly,” Castle said.

Castle’s strategy for getting fresh work out and keeping the “edge” sharp acknowledges the need to be involved with the showrooms. “You have to really keep on top of it... you have to visit them

companies presenting products with the assigned value of quality based on craft. Studio designers might do well to observe industry practice for production and successful retail practice, in order to develop new making and marketing strategies. Any comparison between market-driven design generated by industry with highly crafted and thoughtfully produced work by studio designers could benefit from an accounting of the attributes of both realms. In the example of developing brand identity for companies like Knoll and Herman Miller, artists such as Harry Bertoia (who created

the *Diamond Chair* for Knoll) and Isamu Noguchi (whose c. 1950s tables continue to be produced by Herman Miller) provide continued credibility and identity. In these two examples, the stature and reputation of the designers allows the industry to present their designs not as craft, but as fine art.

In an exhibition catalog foreword, museum director Pekka Saarela provides a succinct statement of the case for Finnish craft as practiced by designer Tapio Wirkkala. “This analysis is of equal relevance today, as once again discussion revolves around the relationship between the designer and industry and the added value that craft offers industrial products.”⁸

Extraordinary examples of creativity linked to entrepreneurship and industry can be seen in fashion’s haute couture. Small-scale fashion studios developed by such designers as Issey Miyake have redefined fashion as art by reinventing the kimono and other traditional Japanese garments. Miyake’s approach to fashion is based on experimentation, the craft associated with fabric, and the garments’ relationship to the human form. The designer’s firsthand knowledge of material and processes offers Miyake a distinct edge. He has been quoted as saying, “I am interested in the space between the body and the clothes so that the body can feel entirely at ease. Because each person’s body shape is different, this space creates an



Wendell Castle
Cloud Dining Table

[showrooms]... You have to introduce new things... you have to keep things happening.” In this respect, Wendell Castle believes that “fashion and art have a lot in common.”

Establishing the value of craft

Design critic James Evans makes a case for the “intelligence of the hand... as too long undervalued in 20th century art making.” To Evans, the “language of skill... has been long dismissed and considered an inappropriate strategy to bring to bear in the production of personally expressive works of art.”⁷ For the studio designer, however, the value of handwork is highly prized by

To find out more...

For Robert Griffith's collection, see www.griffithatelier.com.

For Robert Kuo's studio, www.robertkuo.com.
For Kuo's production designs marketed through McGuire, www.kohlerinteriors.com.

To see the full range of Hans Wegner furniture in current production, visit www.dmk.dk/designers.

For Wendell Castle's studio furniture, www.wendellcastle.com. For Castle's full range of production designs marketed through Icon, www.wendellcastlecollection.com.

For mid-century Modern furniture, www.r20thcentury.com.

For more about Issey Miyake, (www.isseymiyake.co.jp).


individual form. It also gives the wearer freedom of movement for body and spirit."⁹ Some may wonder if any other contemporary designer besides Miyake has more effectively applied a design paradigm responding to the human form.

Japanese design has been described by Helen Rees in *The Culture of Craft* as being "dream-like, allowing the imagination to roam unrestrained." In some cases designers are "given [by companies] time and freedom to develop ideas for designs often with no commercial application."¹⁰ In the West, craft continues to be perceived as a product of culture, while manufacturing is associated with technology. In our time, any attempt to define culture in terms of technology will benefit from the exercise of creativity aligned with enterprise.

For fashion designers like Issey Miyake, "the face of the industry is transformed through the conceptual and creative application of aspects of traditional culture, and embracing new technological developments."

The studio designer is challenged now as ever before to inform and transform the market. Manufacturers and consumers continue to look to designers to set trends and contribute to a sense of connoisseurship. A new appreciation for luxury that craft and handwork represent is in place. This introduces new opportunities to the studio designer, as well as new challenges for those whose creative vision can be aligned with the marketplace.

However well equipped with "honest materials" and "intelligent" hands, the studio designer is only partially poised to meet these challenges.

A case can be made for the value of craft in product design only through recognition of this value by collectors and consumers. For the designer, new ways of interacting with producers and consumers will contribute greatly in establishing confidence in investments in high-quality, well-crafted, and innovative products. This will take a close examination of the relevance of craft by the designer. 

Notes

1. Conversation with Robert Kuo, September 2006.
2. Jens Bernsen, *Hans J. Wegner* (Dansk Design Center, 1994).
3. Pilar Viladas, "Art in Commerce," *New York Times Style Magazine*, Fall 2006, p. 147.
4. Conversation with Evan Snyderman at R Twentieth Century Design, NY, October 19, 2006.
5. Donald Albrecht, Wendell Castle: *Autoplastic* (R Twentieth Century Design, 2004).
6. Conversation with Wendell Castle at Scottsville Studio, September 12, 2006.
7. James Evans, "Unintentional Iconoclast," (Roger Billcliffe Fine Art, Glasgow Scotland, 1997) from exhibition catalog *Robert Griffith Tables and Sculpture*.
8. Pekka Saarela, *Tapio Wirkkala: Eye, Hand and Thought* (Museum of Arts & Design, Helsinki, Finland, 2001) p. 8.
9. Louise Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan* (Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia, 2005).
10. Helen Rees, "Pattern of Making: Thinking and Making in Industrial Design," *The Culture of Craft* (Manchester University Press, 1997) p. 118–119.

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