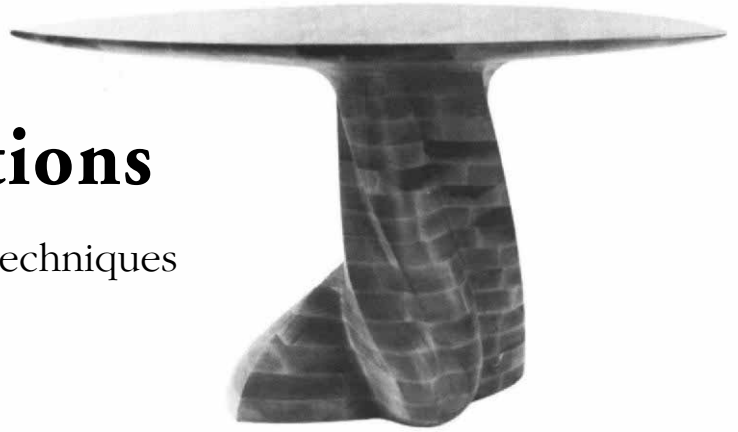


Design Considerations

Thoughts on forms, materials and techniques

by Wendell Castle



I sometimes feel it may be a mistake for an artist to speak or write too much about his own work or the work of others. By trying to express his aims with rounded-off logical exactness, he can easily become a theorist whose actual work may never come up to the conceptions evolved by logic and word. The nonlogical, instinctive, subconscious part of the mind does play an important part in the work.

I'm certain that far too often work is done for its own sake, design for design's sake. All things must lead somewhere: there must be a conscious effort to take the work in some logical direction.

The gamut that furniture may span is as wide as architecture—from simple folk pieces, showing honesty and directness of means, to pieces of great sophistication, expressing a conscious reforming of nature. When a work of art also serves a utilitarian purpose, as in furniture, its form is affected by its function. The fundamental purpose does set limits on the creative freedom of the artist or designer. Art has an ideological function but the function of furniture is not ideological, it is utilitarian. It is true that utility does not require more than a practical solution. But that solution will be in conflict with other essential instincts if it does not show an esthetic concern as well as various practical concerns. Unless this need for form is satisfied along with the functional need, the product will be incomplete.

Like many conscious acts of man, design is achieved almost simultaneously on several different levels: esthetic, mechanical, psychological, ethical and so on. I try for a fusion of these basic considerations, to give the design unity. I arrange these considerations consciously or subconsciously, adhering to the requirements of the problem without losing sight of my personal inclinations. My work deals mostly with organic form. Organic form as an entity does not let itself be clearly grasped, in the sense that a box-like form is comprehended and measured at first glance. There is a certain mystery derived from its kinship with nature. My forms are hybrids—they may be plant-like, animal-like, shell-like, etc. I make no attempt to reconstruct or stylize natural forms, but rather I try to produce a synthesis or metamorphosis of natural forms.

The quality of a plastic or organic form in nature can be reconstructed only as an illusion, an approximation. Furniture or any other man-made object, even in its wildest form, remains something created and set in order by human hands, ruled by laws quite different from those of nature. In

spite of this, it is possible to make objects in which certain aspects rival nature, but which otherwise are governed by different principles. From these very contradictory principles a fascinating form evolves.

Too great a respect for material seems to be a special hang-up for craftsmen. There is a great tradition of working in certain ways with certain materials. Craftsmen are taught that some forms are more honest than others. But the more we think of the nature of a material the more ambiguous it becomes. Materials are wiggling under our fingertips, there are new materials being invented every day, there are old materials being used in new ways. The form-material relationship that was once acceptable is by no means sufficient in our day.

Form is the reason for laminating furniture. Forms can be realized that with other methods of joinery would not be possible. It is not just a matter of building up large volume, but the volume can be shaped as it is being built, thereby realizing a great saving in time and materials. A skillful person can understand forms so accurately that he knows the precise shape of every cross section. With each cross section accurately cut only a minimum of work is left to be done when the lamination is complete.

I feel I am free to use my material as I wish, but I do not allow this freedom from the restrictions of the material to go entirely unchecked. My forms are not completely free form. They are designed and constructed within strict boundaries. These are boundaries of human scale, of function as furniture: tables need tops at the right height, chairs have to comfortably fit the people sitting in them. There are boundaries imposed by the nature of the material; for example, you wouldn't stack a wasp-waisted Saarinen pedestal—it would break. Laminated wood is heavy, more suited to large, massive pieces than to lightweight movables. Many forms that I might dream up would simply require too much time to stack and carve. This is economics, perhaps a crass consideration, but necessary for one who makes his living doing this.

The technique itself imposes limits because it lends itself so well to subtle, slow changes in grain direction—as opposed to the abrupt changes of the traditional, right-angled mortise and tenon. And it has built-in pitfalls: it takes a stronger sense of sculptural form than does working in the vocabulary normally associated with furniture, where the results are more predictable. There is more chance of getting into clumsy, heavy and awkward pieces, and that's where many people often go wrong, by not understanding how stacking can best be used.

Wendell Castle produces 75 major pieces of furniture a year, with the help of three full-time employees. He is professor of sculpture at the State University of New York, Brockport.