

**Furniture that Winks: Wit and Conversation in
Postmodern Studio Furniture, 1979-1989**

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Introduction

In 1979, California furniture maker Garry Knox Bennett worked to build a finer cabinet than he had ever made before.¹ Crafted from tropical padauk wood, constructed with dovetails and sporting a curved glass door, the cabinet demonstrated fine furniture making skill. Yet, all this careful preciousness served merely as a means to an end. After lavishing more time and attention on the cabinet than Bennett normally gave to his projects, he used the cabinet to mock the very same preciousness. Feeling stifled by “all the little perfect finishes, [the] East Coast guys, all their walnut and their dovetails,” Bennett picked up his hammer and deliberately bashed a 16-penny nail into his cabinet door, intentionally leaving a trail of hammer marks on the padauk surface. As a mark of his intention, rather than wild frustration, he first removed the door to his workbench, then met it with his hammer.²

With this action, Bennett communicated ideas about work, creativity, and the furniture field.³ Not everyone, however, necessarily understood or approved of his message.⁴ When *Fine Woodworking* editor John Kelsey printed an image of the *Nail Cabinet* on the back of the September/October 1980 issue accompanied by a description, woodworkers put down their chisels and wrote in to the magazine. Incensed, Henry Intili of Jasper, NY railed against Bennett’s “egotistical immaturity” with the cabinet when he “render[ed] it unsellable.”⁵ Henry Fisher expressed how he wished for Bennett’s talent “with less of his imagination,” lamenting “too many people are trying to be different by being silly.”⁶ In fact, the magazine received many cancellation letters after it shared Bennett’s piece with the readership.⁷

Despite these detractors, the cabinet helped shove the woodworking community towards a new era of craft furniture.⁸ Bennett engaged with the techniques and vocabulary of his craft to make a conscious artistic statement. In 1990, Arthur C. Danto wrote an article about “Furniture as Art” for *The Nation*, citing Bennett’s *Nail Cabinet* as a “most admirable example of boundary-breaking furniture.”⁹ In the article, he describes the hammering and subsequent “halo of dents” as a “Rimbaud-like gesture (‘One evening I sat Beauty on my knees. And I found her bitter. And I injured her’)” that “repudiates three decades of essentialist quest, and is itself the very essence of the postmodern spirit in art.”¹⁰ Indeed, the *Nail Cabinet* serves as a dynamic marker for a new direction in studio furniture as furniture makers shared the “postmodern spirit,” rejecting or moving away from modernist ideals while still remaining distinctly within the craft tradition.¹¹

Studio furniture makers engaged with postmodern ideas in a variety of ways during the latter half of the twentieth century. My investigation here will focus on four particular pieces of furniture made between 1979 and 1989 that help articulate expressions of postmodern thought in craft furniture and how such thinking opened the field to new directions. The artificial date range begins in 1979 as Garry Knox Bennett’s *Nail Cabinet* truly ushered in the “postmodern spirit” by consciously protesting the modernist ideologies of the first-generation makers, using craft materials and techniques to comment on craft processes. The field opened up during the 1980s, spurred by economic growth and enthusiastic collectors.¹² In 1989, Edward S. Cooke, Jr. curated *New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.¹³ This well-publicized show in an established art museum brought studio furniture a new level of recognition. While makers expressed

postmodernist tendencies prior to and following 1979-1989, this time period marks a moment in studio furniture in which furniture makers especially engaged with postmodern ideas and interests and in so doing, effected a strong shift in the field.

My exploration of these influential, field-altering ideas will necessarily focus on four particular aspects of postmodern thought that different makers expressed in their work.¹⁴ In this discussion, I aim to begin a neglected conversation about postmodernism in the history of craft furniture. Although postmodernism is widely understood in a variety of ways in different fields, I draw on these various understandings to see particularly how artistic thinkers in studio furniture engaged with postmodernism.¹⁵

The first chapter analyzes Garry Knox Bennett's *Nail Cabinet* and other pieces that articulate postmodernism as a rejection of modernism. For many critics of modernism, its austere sterility in architecture and design meant inapproachability. Architects like Charles Jencks and Robert Venturi expressed dissatisfaction with the style both from their point of view as designers and on the part of the end user. In craft furniture, some makers felt limited by the "form follows function" and "truth to materials" ideals expressed by their predecessors. Besides outright statements like Bennett's nail, part of the rejection of modernism came in returning to decoration and employing materials other than wood—even including the great sacrilege: paint.

Chapter Two investigates Mitch Ryerson's playful *Washboard Children's Highchair* and the way in which Ryerson composed a narrative in a functional furniture piece by engaging the communicative properties of found objects. If the first generation communicated ideas of function, beauty and respect for material and craftsmanship in their furniture, many second-generation makers like Ryerson instead made furniture that

told a narrative or dealt with moral questions, making social statements in an art-like way.

By discussing Ed Zucca's *Shaker Television* and other work, Chapter Three explores one of the most easily recognizable characteristics of postmodernism in studio furniture: a return to history. Makers deliberately drew on history (including historical furniture traditions) to communicate ideas and jokes to their audience. This historicism should not be confused with the strong tradition of making reproduction furniture that exists in the woodworking community. It also differed from the subtle traces of American vernacular furniture present in the modernist work of makers like George Nakashima. Rather, for makers like Ed Zucca, historical elements offered a source of inspiration and a vocabulary for communication. In another vein of historicism, makers like James Schriber, Richard Scott Newman and Wendell Castle engaged in an historical classicism as they drew on historical styles to ultimately create updated versions of classical furniture styles.

The fourth and final chapter takes a more conceptual turn, investigating how John Cederquist's chest of drawers *Le Fleuron Manquant* (*The Missing Finial*) joined a postmodern interest in simulation and reality. In cultural, literary, as well as architectural criticism, writers during the second half of the twentieth century concerned themselves with the cultural relationship to reality. Jean Baudrillard wrote *Simulacra and Simulation* exploring the societal acceptance of simulacra in place of the real, while Fredric Jameson and architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable also expressed concerns about our cultural obsession with images, at the exclusion of (or confusion with) the Real.¹⁶ Some makers,

like Cederquist, took this interest in perception and reality as a subject for furniture and other craft, questioning our physical and psychological response to represented images.

These four chapters only begin to address the complicated relationship between postmodern ideas and craft furniture. While some pieces of furniture (notably those designed by the Italian Memphis group) epitomize a “stylistic postmodernism,” many works of studio furniture express interest in the theoretical questions and discussions inherent in the movement known as postmodernism yet differ vastly on aesthetic grounds. This paper does not, then, discuss postmodernism in studio furniture as a “style.”

By no means did all craft furniture makers engage with these ideas in their work. In fact, only 7% (7 of 106) of interviewed makers reported being specifically influenced by postmodernism in a survey Oscar Fitzgerald conducted in 2004. Yet, more furniture makers engaged with postmodernism (whether as epitomized by architecture or theory) in their work than this number reflects.¹⁷ In part, this low response relates to the period in which Fitzgerald conducted the survey and the diminished interest in the movement at that time.¹⁸ Interviews with makers like Garry Knox Bennett or John Cederquist point to an even clearer reason for the under-representative response: uncertainty about what the word even means.¹⁹ In an interview with the author, John Dunnigan clearly articulated why even asking the question of influence becomes problematic. He recalled: “I think the reality is that when I was starting out, I was doing postmodern work from the beginning, but I wasn’t doing that because I was influenced by someone else doing postmodern work; I was doing it because that’s who I was.” Rather, his work and other work in a similar vein all drew on, as Dunnigan described it, a “collective consciousness.”²⁰

Yet, whether or not makers saw themselves as engaging in postmodernism is not important. To apply the term, however defined, does not change how the ideas and interests in the postmodern zeitgeist captivated furniture makers as well as architects. In this historical discussion, I use postmodernism as a framework rather than a tool for characterization to investigate the intellectual interests of creative furniture makers. Where the field had served to offer function and beauty before, the makers herein wanted to expand the purpose of their furniture. By cleverly winking at the audience, the witty pieces engaged in conversation while still maintaining the skill and function (the latter to various degrees) present in earlier, modernist craft furniture.

Before progressing to even this distilled discussion of postmodern influences in studio furniture, we should first address some of the background and understanding for what postmodernism means. Many writers in different fields have worked to define this movement that sought to answer some of the dissatisfactions with Modernism. Charles Jencks popularized the term in architecture with his 1977 *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*.²¹ Professor of literature Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* worked to explore postmodernism as a cultural moment.²² In 1983, Hal Foster edited a volume of essays exploring postmodernism in relation to the visual arts.²³ Very little writing, however, discusses how craft furniture makers contributed to postmodernism.²⁴

In her book that asked *Has Modernism Failed?*, Suzi Gablik noted that “Postmodernism is the somewhat weasel word” employed “to describe the garbled situation of art in the ‘80s” and that “nobody quite fully understands” it as no one has offered a “clear-cut definition.”²⁵ Such attempts to characterize postmodernism range