

from describing it as an aesthetic rejection of modernism or a disbelief in “modern myths of progress and mastery” to a matter of the “politics of interpretation.”²⁶

Given the varied understandings of postmodernism, it becomes necessary to outline a somewhat arbitrary definition for postmodernism in the context of studio furniture. Literally, it means that which came after the modern. Yet, because literature, film, art and architecture each found different ways of expressing modernity and its anxieties and celebrations, the various responses also took a range of forms. At the same time, some characteristics and ideas of modernism and postmodernism carry across different fields and offer a useful understanding for this discussion.

The Utopian project of modernism strove to create a better, more peaceful world; poet Ezra Pound’s proclamation “make it new” offered one solution. Architects and designers turned to a stripped down modern style, the austerity of which privileged no one nation or culture over another and avoided referencing the past.²⁷ With the desire to make new artistic creations unrelated to the past came a push for originality. In modern art, artists adhered to an idea of autonomy—that a painting or sculpture could stand alone, “existing without reference to or influence from anything else.”²⁸ In painting and sculpture this involved abstraction and focusing on and emphasizing the particular essential qualities that make a painting a painting—its two-dimensionality, or flatness—and a sculpture a sculpture—its three-dimensionality, or form. In architecture and design, this formalism and desire for purity manifested in a focus on function. Architect Louis Sullivan influenced this functional attention, declaring, “form ever follows function.”²⁹ The shortened “form follows function” became a mantra in modernism, reinforcing sparseness and the rejection of ornament that came from denying historical sources.

Formalist intentions also affected how materials were used. Designers and architects tried to be faithful to their materials. “Truth to materials,” another modernist mantra, involved designing with a material’s property and limitations in mind and not allowing one material to try to look like or do the job best suited to another.³⁰

Yet, modernism’s rejection of history and adherence to formalist rules did not create the better world it promised and many found fault with modernism’s ideas and assumptions. Philip Johnson, an architect trained in the modernist ideals of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, addressed the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in 1978 and said, “we knew we were right and going to create a better world. Well, it didn’t happen.” Charles Jencks’ 1977 book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* particularly articulated how modernism no longer could be an appropriate way of architectural expression. He built off other discontentment: Jane Jacobs’ 1961 complaint against modern city planning and development (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*) and Robert Venturi’s 1966 cry that “Less is a bore,” encouraging a return to *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, among others.³¹

The complaints against modernism ranged from aesthetic to philosophic. Seen as bleak, cold and impersonal, modernist architecture and design were criticized for being boring and overly concerned with purism and the machine aesthetic.³² In an article about Robert Venturi in 1971, Paul Goldberger articulated that such simplicity in architecture offered “an approach unsuitable to the irony and complexity of modern times.”³³ In addition, the idea of autonomous, original art yielded buildings that failed to relate to their surroundings and art without “contextual meaning.”³⁴ This lack of context resulted in public wariness of modern art and architecture in the 1950s; it did not effectively

communicate to the public, instead offering veiled or obscure meaning, discernable only to the initiated.³⁵ In fact, Charles Jencks' largest complaint against modernism lay in its inability to "communicate effectively with its ultimate users."³⁶

Postmodernism, then, is the name given to efforts to address these failings, or that simply reacted against some of the characteristics of modernism. This particularly means a return to history, ornament and decoration (and color) but also experimentation with different materials, techniques and ways of communicating.³⁷ In art, this shift came as some artists moved to representational art rather than abstract expressionism.

The move away from modernism, while celebrated by some, also found its own detractors. After Charles Jencks named the new architecture "post-modern," articles on architecture buzzed with discussion (fueled further by Philip Johnson and John Burgee's proposal for a different kind of skyscraper for New York's AT&T building, 1978-1983). In the *Washington Post* in 1978, Wolf Von Eckardt defined "post-modernism" for his readers as "a form of capricious outdoor sculpture, with a lot of hollow spaces and super-sized jungle gyms."³⁸ Suzi Gablik noted that postmodernism's response to modernism carried its own problems, including an "overload of stimuli," an "impenetrable pluralism of competing approaches" and an "absence of order."³⁹ Postmodern theorists addressed similar concerns, articulating these symptoms of postmodernity.⁴⁰

The furniture to follow will continue this discussion and demonstrate some ways in which studio furniture artists responded both to modernism and the postmodern age. In an essay, "Craft, Modernity and Postmodernity," art theorist and historian Terry Smith laughed at the idea of "critical postmodernism and the crafts," yet we will see furniture that moves towards such critical expression as it seeks to communicate with the public.⁴¹

The furniture makers discussed herein used their craft to comment on furniture and society, using wry, winking humor to do so.

Furniture that Winks

Consider, [Gilbert Ryle] says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical... Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company.⁴²

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz offered the above description of winking to help articulate the difference between a “thin description” (a rapid contraction of the eyelid) and a “thick description” (a conspiratorial wink) in anthropological observation. While Geertz discussed the way people could be twitching, winking, or even parodying a wink with the same observable action (rapidly contracting an eyelid), the characteristics he describes can easily apply to artwork as well, and specifically here, to studio furniture.

Take for example, Bennett’s *Nail Cabinet*, briefly described in the introduction. The bent-over nail with nearby hammer-induced surface damage on the wood could be more like a twitch—a mistakenly placed nail in wood, inexpertly driven—as if a board had been given to a novice with which to practice. Yet, because of the context of the cabinet—its careful finishes and attentions, tropical veneers and dovetailed casework—we know that the nail is winking, not twitching. Bennett deliberately planned the nail to communicate directly to the woodworking community. In this inside commentary, he used the communicative code of the particular culture: a nail signifies speedy

construction.⁴³ It is a fastener used by a framer or inept furniture repairer.⁴⁴ Like Geertz's wink, the nail in context expressed a particular message about preciousness, technique and creativity. Geertz also noted that a wink must be conspiratorial, "without cognizance of the rest of the company." For Bennett's nail, anyone not versed in the woodworking vocabulary or aware of some of its history could easily miss the nuanced message (even if they could determine some part of the intent, knowing that a nail standing proud of a nice wood board in a well-made cabinet was somehow "wrong.") In fact, myriad insiders missed the *Nail Cabinet's* joke and message, thinking it was only a childish attempt for attention.⁴⁵ One woodworker who missed the wink wrote Bennett, encouraging him to consider how the plank of wood felt when he drove the nail into it. Bennett's reply suggested that the woodworker ask how the tree felt before the chainsaw fell it.⁴⁶

The furniture in the chapters to follow each offer a wink rather than a straightforward twitch. The key element is the consciousness, the "deliberate" action on the part of the furniture maker to communicate in some conspiratorial way. The furniture brings the viewer in on the joke, using established social and historical codes to do so.

This consciousness in itself is part of postmodernism. As art and architecture returned to historical sources, they consciously admitted acceptance of the past and drew on our collective knowledge to better communicate with their audiences. Even the fields of sociology, anthropology and literature also took new shape as thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida expressed new awareness and consciousness.⁴⁷ The way second-generation furniture makers engaged their own and their audience's awareness of furniture and its history participated in the postmodern consciousness while relying on it for communicative effect. We will begin our exploration of this conscious

communication in Chapter One by investigating how Garry Knox Bennett and other makers rejected modernist ideals in craft furniture.

Chapter 1

Rejecting Modernism in Craft Furniture

In March of 1979 Warren Rubin, chairman of the New York-based furniture store Workbench, wrote furniture maker Garry Knox Bennett after recently encountering Bennett's work.⁴⁸ This discovery prompted Rubin to both commission a desk and ask to display Bennett's work at his New York and Philadelphia stores. A year later, Rubin and his wife Bernice Wollman were preparing for the inaugural exhibit for the Workbench Gallery: a one-man show of Garry Knox Bennett's work.⁴⁹ The show opened on September 10, 1980 in the Workbench flagship store on Park Avenue featuring, among other work, Bennett's *Nail Cabinet* (1979). The \$5,000 cabinet (the most expensive piece in the show) did not sell in spite of the publicity it had received in the woodworking community or elsewhere.⁵⁰ However, the cabinet and show helped usher in a new decade of studio furniture.

Indeed, the opening of the Workbench Gallery created a new venue for studio furniture as well. A press release announcing the Workbench Gallery's opening noted the gallery planned to host five exhibits the following year. By having a space specifically dedicated to craft furniture exhibition, Warren Rubin and Bernice Wollman "hope[d] to make more people aware of what [was] happening in this exciting field" and do their part to encourage its development.⁵¹

Eight months later, Bebe and Warren Johnson opened Pritam & Eames Gallery on Long Island, also devoting their gallery to the display and sale of craft furniture. These two dedicated galleries offered new settings for furniture that stretched the direction of the field. Some of these pieces, like Bennett's *Nail Cabinet*, opposed the modernists'

tendencies that previously dominated studio furniture. While “Modernism may seem inimical to everything the artist-craftsman stands for,” as British art critic Edward Lucie-Smith noted, the ideas and interests of modernism captivated craftspersons as much as they did artists and architects—an influence to explore before further examining the rebuttal.⁵²

In 1993, jeweler and writer Bruce Metcalf contributed an essay to *American Craft* entitled “Replacing the Myth of Modernism,” objecting to the modernist formalism he had long observed in the crafts. In it, Metcalf argued: “craftspeople should stop trying to make modern art.” He acknowledged crafts’ inextricable relationship to history and tradition but found it ironic that “contemporary craft is one of the last bastions of faith in Modernism.” Crafts, in their desire to be acknowledged as fine art, he argued, followed modernist ideas by trying to disconnect from the past, celebrating the constant push for newness and praising originality.⁵³

Metcalf’s complaints related to the continued debate in which some people wished to define craft as art. Metcalf heartily believed in the crafts as distinct from fine art, yet he still thought crafts could communicate ideas: “Craft objects can stand back and offer commentary, propose reforms, advocate traditions.” Indeed, he wanted craftspersons to engage with ideas rather than create autonomous art objects “that do nothing but sit on a pedestal and look pretty.” In the end, Metcalf encouraged the crafts to be themselves, to embrace their history and traditions—their craftness—and not aspire to be modern art.

While Metcalf’s admonishments came in the early 1990s—long after modernism “died” in architecture—crafts had followed modernist philosophy and aesthetics since the

studio craft movement began.⁵⁴ A catalog for the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art's *American Crafts '76: An Aesthetic View* offered: "until the late 1950's [sic]" crafts "remained generally within the *form follows function* or *truth to materials* aesthetic."⁵⁵ The exhibit argued that contemporary craft instead "fulfill[ed] the same vigorous aesthetic expectations we set for painting and sculpture."⁵⁶ With this, crafts in the 1960s and 1970s began to engage ideas over function.

Studio furniture, as much as other crafts, experienced this emphasis on modernist ideals in its beginnings and during its growth in the 1950s. The makers in the "first generation" may have reacted against mass-produced furniture by creating one-of-a-kind and production pieces on a small scale, but they espoused modernist ideals.⁵⁷ Jeremy Adamson wrote that the aesthetic of these early makers like Sam Maloof, Wharton Esherick and George Nakashima, for example, "was based on a modernist reverence for the beauty of solid hardwoods, a love of simple, sculptural forms, and above all, function."⁵⁸ Indeed, the first generation's espousal of modernist ideas appears most clearly in their emphasis on function, their relationship to materials, and the content of the furniture.

When maker Wendell Castle began creating furniture in the late 1950s, he found little to interest him in contemporary furniture "because everyone was doing 'form-follows-function' pieces."⁵⁹ Indeed, Tage Frid (a Danish woodworker who taught furniture making at the School for American Craftsman and at Rhode Island School of Design, and published instructional articles and books) would later write: "I believe furniture should be functional, designed around the construction and the proportions and shapes of the environment and the users."⁶⁰ He taught woodworkers to "design around

construction,” meaning that their understanding of how the material behaves and can be joined should guide sound, functional design. This, he thought, created better furniture than when a maker begins with an idea of a form and tries to achieve it. George Nakashima preferred to let the wood determine the design and the function, but function nonetheless remained important.⁶¹ The Californian furniture maker Arthur Espenet Carpenter also strongly believed that furniture should fulfill a function. The catalog for the very first show at the Renwick Gallery, *Woodenworks* (1972), quoted him declaring: “Furniture is to be used.” He added, “I don’t think there’s any need for the crafts to pretend that they are doing more than making beautiful things for function.”⁶² Indeed, Carpenter took inspiration from the Museum of Modern Art’s mid-century Good Design exhibitions that strongly advocated Modernist ideas.⁶³

In addition to the “form follows function” design mantra, first-generation studio furniture makers also accepted the idea of “truth to materials.” Often, this translated into displaying, even highlighting, careful joinery and construction. Frid’s desire to “design around construction” related to the ways the materials (in this case, wood) could create form. For him, construction also took into account the properties and aesthetics of the material.⁶⁴ Beyond this, however, many of the first generation makers like Frid held a peculiarly strong “reverence for wood.”⁶⁵ George Nakashima titled his biography *The Soul of a Tree* and in it presented his belief that making durable furniture from wood offers a tree a second life.⁶⁶ In his first book on woodworking, Tage Frid wrote, “working with a material of such natural beauty, I feel that we have to design very quietly and use simple forms.”⁶⁷ James Krenov wrote of having a “love affair” with his wood.⁶⁸

In a 1978 *Craft Horizons with Craft World* article about Wendell Castle, Sally Eauclaire noted that when Castle began his career in the late 1950s, “truth to material” was the dictum of the design field.” Castle “concluded that tree forms” would best suit the material and thus made organic, branching, twisting forms in wood. Eauclaire quoted him reflecting: “It seemed most honest to reflect the shape and material in which I was working. Nothing seemed more woodlike than a tree.” He tried to capture the essence of his material in his designs. Although not all makers expressed the same opinions verbally, the furniture of the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s—focusing on the richness, feel and grain of the wood—all spoke to the value the craftspersons placed on material.⁶⁹

While modernist architecture, art and design deliberately avoided references to the past, studio furniture has a murkier relationship with history and tradition. Just as William Morris turned to hand-made, limited production crafts to romanticize pre-industrial production, any post-industrial studio craft necessarily calls on tradition. Furniture makers George Nakashima, Tage Frid and James Krenov each acknowledged the importance of working within a tradition.⁷⁰

Modernism, however, prized originality. Writing about tradition in studio furniture, Miguel Gomez-Ibañez noted: “with Modernism came a new morality, and the belief that imitation was not honorable or worthy.”⁷¹ While crafts and decorative traditions have a long history of borrowing and adapting form and decoration, craftspersons who accepted the modernist quest for autonomy had to reject such influences and create their own unique style. Cabinetmaker James Krenov acknowledged this pressure in his *A Cabinetmaker’s Notebook*: “we are being pushed around by people wanting something new, different” along with “the other pressure of doing the new

without borrowing too much of the old.”⁷² In the quest for originality, Sam Maloof denied sources for his work.⁷³ Journalist Debra Lee Baldwin relayed a story in which a woman watching Maloof work asked him what style his furniture was. In reply, he offered only his own national heritage: “Lebanese.”⁷⁴ Makers like Nakashima, Maloof, and even Krenov, strove to create their own unique, individual style. Although these makers developed original furniture, they also repeated their basic designs (or essence thereof) over and over again.

For studio craft furniture, the emphasis on originality meant both the rejection of ornament and an artistic push toward new forms. In these new designs, makers relied on the natural figuring of the wood and emphasized joinery as the sole mode of ornamentation. In describing the furniture of first generation makers like Wharton Esherick, George Nakashima, Sam Maloof, Walker Weed, Arthur Carpenter and Tage Frid, Edward S. Cooke wrote that they made “comfortable and beautiful furniture following abstract or ahistorical design principles.”⁷⁵ As they avoided deliberate, obvious historical references, or abstracted them into their undecorated furniture, these craftsmen followed the ideas of modernism and its preference for isolated original design.

In conclusion, much of the first-generation furniture related stylistically to the spare, clean lines of modernism and shared some of its philosophies (*e.g.* truth to material, form follows function, and an abstract or ahistorical design approach) while still offering an alternative response to modernity along with other studio craft. Although some craft furniture avoided adherence to modernist ideals in the 1960s and 1970s, it was not until the late 1970s that the field began to take a very different direction. The rebellious efforts of some second-generation makers brought new possibilities to the