

field. Garry Knox Bennett's *Nail Cabinet* helped introduce this change and so offers an insightful discussion of the movement away from modernism and towards playful, witty, colorful and communicative furniture.

Nail Cabinet: A Postmodernist Statement

In his 1979 *Nail Cabinet* (fig. 1), Garry Knox Bennett's 16-penny nail stood as a direct rejection of the modernist and traditionalist ideals held by the bastions of craft furniture at the time. In order to dismantle the "truth-to-materials" and "form-follows-function" puristic ideology that had dominated studio craft, Bennett had to create a piece that addressed it and moved beyond. Art critic Arthur C. Danto understands the six-foot tall display cabinet as a sacrifice, undertaken on behalf of all furniture makers. He considers it the "very essence" of the postmodern rejection of modernism. While writers in the furniture field have taken issue with some of Danto's argument, that the cabinet responded strongly to the first generation and helped broaden the field is unquestionable.⁷⁶

Other furniture before Bennett's *Nail Cabinet* had stretched beyond the bounds of the first generation's woodworking tradition. However, Bennett rebelled quite consciously and for it received visibility and fanfare. The *Nail Cabinet's* great wit lies in that Bennett employed the woodworking vocabulary of the craft tradition to make his statement. He knew he would reach his colleagues by speaking their language. Clement Greenberg would argue that such insular critical techniques (art about art) belong in the modernist toolbox (as he did in his essay "Modernist Painting"), but I maintain that the nature of Bennett's commentary made it a decisively postmodern act. With the nail, Bennett seriously stated it was time for the field to move away from its modernist ideals.

How did the commentary work so effectively? In part, the design, craft and content of the cabinet itself did a marvelous job, but the publicity on the back cover of *Fine Woodworking* carried the message to amateur and professional woodworkers across the country.⁷⁷ The resulting outrage and dialogue in the letters to the editor insured that the piece received notice beyond the Contemporary Artisans Gallery in California where it first publicly appeared. As for the cabinet itself, Bennett claims it required the trickiest and most sophisticated work he had done to that point and he sought assistance building the cabinet.⁷⁸ Bennett came to woodworking without any training, having studied as a painter. Unencumbered by technical knowledge or awareness of “rules” of construction, Bennett taught himself to design and build according to his ideas.⁷⁹ For the *Nail Cabinet*, he carefully made the piece traditionally enough so other makers, his audience, would not immediately dismiss the cabinet and therefore have time to understand his message.

The cabinet at first glance appears as a normal contribution to the world of 1970s craft furniture—a basic display cabinet with a natural wood finish, rounded edges and the added sophistication of a round glass door for the display case. The curved glass door fills the left half of the cabinet, with shelves behind for display. The right half contains five simple drawers and two doors in vertical succession.

Then, as you look more closely, you spot the nail and the Greek soldiers start climbing out of the Trojan horse. In a letter to Arthur Danto, following Danto’s discussion of the cabinet in *The Nation* in 1990, former *Fine Woodworking* editor John Kelsey explained some of these quirks.⁸⁰ The way Bennett framed the two wooden doors on the right side of the cabinet denies typical construction technique. In framing the curved glass to create the door, Bennett used typical construction when he made the

vertical boards, or stiles, extend the full height of the door, flanking the glass and the horizontal boards, or rails. Yet, when he framed the wooden doors he opted only to use rails, this time allowing them to span the full width of the door board (fig. 2).⁸¹

Then, when constructing the five drawers that grace the lower half of the cabinet's right side, Bennett again deliberately defied convention. He brought the drawer joinery to the front rather than conceal it behind the drawer faces. Typically when furniture makers construct drawers, they use half-blind dovetails to conceal the joinery behind the drawer face. While the idea of honest construction that encouraged through tenons in Arts and Crafts furniture smacks of modernist purity, Bennett made his joinery visible to deliberately mock the purist aesthetic and emphasis on joinery he observed in furniture. Rather than use interlocking dovetails, Bennett employed the simpler version of straight finger joints. Such joinery can easily be cut on a tablesaw and thus displays very little skill. Yet, he features the joints prominently. To highlight these simple joints as if they were careful, decorative hand-cut dovetails underscores his critique.⁸²

These construction quirks pale beside the infamous nail, however. Had Bennett not banged the nail into the upper wooden door, the cabinet would merely serve as a slightly unorthodox display case. Instead, the nail made a direct, iconoclastic statement and attracted attention from the moment Bennett laid down the hammer and had two witnesses sign the second drawer. As can happen to things glorified or reviled, the nail was stolen while on display in a later show. It had stood proud of the wood, but Bennett wired down its replacement. Caged or not, the nail and neighboring dings wink at the viewer, encouraging him to slow down and discover Bennett's message.⁸³

As to what this message entails, writers and furniture makers have offered a variety of viewpoints. For Arthur Danto, the nail is like a stake driven into the heart of modernist ideology, rejecting its doctrines and epitomizing “the postmodern spirit in art.” “The cabinet,” he wrote in the Bennett retrospective catalog *Made in Oakland*, “was designed and undertaken as a sacrifice,” and like such, it needed to be good enough that the nail hurt. He argued that the cabinet met “the criteria of purity that defined the woodworker’s craft” and thus the “hammer blows [demonstrated] the end of the purist aesthetic.” This act was “a gesture of liberation, the sacrifice of modernism in the name of artistic freedom” and this sacrifice carried “for all who practiced the crafts.” For Danto, the cabinet loudly rejected Modernism in furniture and made way for a new realm of artistic possibility.⁸⁴

Loy Martin disagreed with Danto’s interpretation of cabinet-as-sacrifice because the cabinet, he argued, is not nearly as fine as Danto supposes. Instead, “it is a competent and nicely designed bit of small shop furniture making, nothing more.” Martin observed that in some instances the construction and finish is even sloppy, yet “the piece adequately indicates a construction process that is relatively slow and painstaking.” For Martin, the cabinet is about work—about the time craftsmanship requires. He argued that the nail, rather than being the sacrificial symbol Danto described, signifies construction speed. Furniture makers do not employ nails for typical construction—a range of joinery methods accomplish that goal. Rather, as Martin pointed out, the nail signifies the framer’s trade wherein wood is speedily joined with a few hammer blows. Thus, the non-functioning nail “only reports how quickly it was driven” as opposed to the slow process

of building the cabinet. Martin concluded that Bennett's piece expresses the artist's ambivalence about the time and skill necessary for furniture making.⁸⁵

John Kelsey offered a different interpretation. When he published the *Nail Cabinet* on the back page of *Fine Woodworking* in September of 1980, it appeared beside a Wendy Maruyama desk with the querying title "Decoration vs. Desecration."

Maruyama had scribbled a crayon glyph on the surface of her desk, also painting purple squares to mimic hidden joinery beneath. Kelsey's written description of Bennett's

cabinet noted that it was a "refined comment on crafts processes and router bit

aesthetics."⁸⁶ In an article in the *New York Times* the same month, Suzanne Slesin

publicized Bennett's one-man show at the Workbench Gallery. About the nail in the

cabinet, she quoted Bennett to say: "That's to kill the wood-worker's router aesthetic."⁸⁷

John Kelsey illuminated this insider commentary both in a letter he wrote to Arthur

Danto in 1990 (as quoted in *Made in Oakland*) and in a later article for *Woodwork*

magazine in October 2001. The cabinet, he pointed out, has "jig-made dovetails," "jigged

finger-joints" and "edges that are uniformly rounded over in the then-current 1/2" router

bit-style." In fact, a cross-section view of the cabinet "has the same profile as that [1/2"

round-over] router bit;" it is a "half-round bullnose writ large" (fig. 3).⁸⁸ Kelsey noted,

however, that this joke missed most woodworkers.⁸⁹

Thus, in Kelsey's estimation, what Bennett communicated with the *Nail Cabinet*

was a jab at his fellow maker's lack of creativity. It is a "joke on furniture makers, on

magazines, and on art critics."⁹⁰ When faced with questions of design and finishing,

many woodworkers in the 1970s turned to their router bits for solutions, smoothing the

edges and making simple, bit-produced moldings (like those on the *Nail Cabinet*).

Bennett wished for his fellow craftsmen to be more creative rather than blindly following pre-packaged artistic solutions. By driving the nail into this jig- and router-made case, Bennett rejected the lack of imagination that he saw in some furniture, propagated by how-to magazines for hobbyists.

Yet, Bennett also made the cabinet to speak to east coast professional woodworkers' emphasis on technique.⁹¹ In his 1986 *Contemporary American Woodworkers*, Michael Stone quoted Bennett to say "I wanted to make a statement [with the *Nail Cabinet*] that I thought people were getting a little too goddamn precious with their technique. I think tricky joinery is just to show, in most instances, you can do tricky joinery."⁹² He found the field's emphasis on precise technique stifling. Bennett taught himself furniture-making, learning as he went, discovering ways to accomplish the things he wanted. He experimented, not knowing the "right" way to do some things, yet succeeded in making interesting, sturdy furniture.⁹³ Thus, the nail also cried, "get over yourselves." Here, the choice to pull the drawer joints to the front makes more sense. In this action he displayed his joinery the way makers like James Krenov did (figs. 4 and 5); the joke is that this time, it was not particularly sophisticated. The unusual door construction acknowledges that it was not created in a conventional, "right" way, yet serves its intended aesthetic and functional purpose.

Is the cabinet a postmodern repudiation of modernist ideals, a commentary on the time required for craft processes, a call to more creative, artistic sensibilities or a thumbed nose towards the dominant voices in the field? I argue that the first and last of these interpretations inform one another. Even if the construction of the cabinet prevents it from being quite the sacrificial calf that Danto depicted, the cabinet portrays a much-

publicized rejection of modernist ideals in studio furniture, making it a prominent example of postmodernism in craft furniture. Bennett himself made the cabinet “fully intending to the ‘the nail thing’ as his statement about the preciousness of fine woodworking.”⁹⁴ Even driving the nail (with the door safely off the cabinet) proved a challenge.⁹⁵

Despite what Bennett intended the piece to do, the multiple articles and publications that address it have created their own meaning for the piece.⁹⁶ The *Nail Cabinet* started a dialogue in 1979 that has continued well beyond Bennett’s studio or the gallery floors it graced. The cabinet itself reveals some of the conversation. One day, Bennett pulled out one of the small drawers and found “This nail business is a stupid idea,” signed Jose Sandoval ’83. Below that, Bennett found another person wrote “Wrong!” and signed it ’87. Bennett delights that this “validates” his work.⁹⁷

By rejecting the emphasis on perfect, exacting technique, Bennett countered some voices of modernist purity (specifically James Krenov and Tage Frid). Yet, the cabinet also stings for those who wanted “truth to materials” and worshipped the wood. In the paragraph on the back cover of *Fine Woodworking*, John Kelsey wrote that Bennett “made this showcase cabinet in order to desecrate it.” *Desecrate*. The word implies that the cabinet—or at least the wood—held a sacred quality that Bennett could violate. The huge metal nail made “the precious thing less precious.”⁹⁸ Suzanne Slesin quoted him to say, “I don’t have the reverence for wood that others might have—I paint it, I stain it.”⁹⁹ Or, drive a nail into it. Nails are for two-by-fours and plywood, not tropical hardwoods. Yet, whether or not the woodworkers got the joke or could interpret what Bennett had

been thinking when he made the piece, the nail successfully communicated ideas of rebellion and made way for other forms of rebellion to follow.

Additionally, Bennett used veneer on the cabinet.¹⁰⁰ While Tage Frid instructed on the veneering process in his *Tage Frid Teaches Woodworking* series for Taunton Press—he supported traditional ways of constructing furniture, after all—veneering allows for “dishonesty” in construction.¹⁰¹ George Nakashima wrote in his autobiography that he chose “solid wood over veneer, for the sake of honesty...solid wood is honest and real.”¹⁰² Veneer falsely creates a selected, beautiful surface, concealing the ‘real,’ structural material underneath. Thus, as Bennett covered much of the cabinet with veneer, he additionally denied “truth to materials.”

Although Bennett does not speak of the *Nail Cabinet* in the context of postmodernism, the piece strongly relates to the ideas and postmodern creations of the decade preceding it. In striking out against the preciousness and push toward precise technique of the first generation, Bennett epitomizes postmodernism to Arthur Danto.¹⁰³ Like Robert Venturi, Charles Moore, Robert Stern and other architects decided architecture could (and should) offer more than glass, metal and concrete boxes, Bennett knew handmade furniture could offer more than carefully crafted, functional pieces emphasizing their woodenness.

However iconoclastic Bennett’s furniture appeared, other makers had previously stepped beyond the technically focused, wood-worshipping furniture craftsmanship. In the 1960s, Tommy Simpson (fig. 6) and Wendell Castle (fig. 7) both made sculptural furniture that countered convention. (Many makers in the 1960s created organic, carved wooden furniture in which wood remained a prominent feature). Simpson painted his

whimsical sculptural forms and Castle even developed a line of plastic molded furniture. These two makers, however, solely represented American whimsical furniture in a 1966 show *Fantasy Furniture*. This exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York (now the Museum of Arts and Design) gathered 26 works from five furniture makers who “refuse[d] to accept the tradition of functionalism” in furniture, instead favoring “fantasy and metaphor” as they “abstracted the idea of furniture.”¹⁰⁴ By choosing to make fantastical yet usable craft furniture, these five makers—according to curator Paul Smith—stood in opposition to “machine-age aesthetics” and rebelled against modernist doctrines. As the three other makers in the show hailed from Italy and Mexico, it seems the rebellion through fantastical furniture was not widespread in the United States.

While Tommy Simpson has continued to make sculptural, painted furniture, his work did not change the field in a noticeable way during the 1960s or 1970s. Glenn Adamson observed that makers who employed paint like Simpson “were considered to be ‘fantasy furniture’ makers [and] ‘off beat’ exceptions” in the field.¹⁰⁵ Furniture making attracted maker Wendy Maruyama precisely because of the artistic way Tommy Simpson and Wendell Castle approached it, but her work only began to shift the field in the early 1980s, after she completed school.¹⁰⁶ Even the prominent Wendell Castle made woody, furniture-like furniture in the 1970s.

With the assistance of *Fine Woodworking*, however, Bennett’s *Nail Cabinet* paired with Maruyama’s *Writing Table* entered the minds and workshops of woodworkers across the country. The pieces asked woodworkers to entertain different

ways of thinking about furniture—beyond reproduction pieces or naturally-inspired functional pieces. Bennett and Maruyama offered that furniture could be about furniture.

As studio furniture moved into the 1980s, more and more makers joined Bennett and Maruyama, making furniture that went beyond the modernist ideas about material and function. People made works that engaged the very idea of furniture and furniture processes. Makers also began to decorate their furniture and play with new materials, as we will see in the next section.

The coded nail and hammer marks helped woodworkers see that furniture could communicate with an audience. More than a decade after *Fantasy Furniture*, the rebellion of content and decoration in that show's works became more widespread. *Fine Woodworking* magazine (founded 1975), new galleries devoted to studio furniture (like the Workbench Gallery and Pritam & Eames, founded in 1980 and 1981, respectively), and increasing interest in school programs (like the Program in Artisanry [PIA] founded at Boston University in 1975) helped provide a forum and encouragement for this conversation that gained momentum in the 1980s.¹⁰⁷

Additional Rebellions in Color, Material and Ornamentation

If driving a nail into the face of a finished plank of wood warranted the term “desecration,” painting wood seemed equally blasphemous. When Bennett made the *Nail Cabinet*, he also constructed a companion piece (fig. 8) from yellow poplar and cherry. The cabinet copied the *Nail Cabinet*'s profile, while discarding the router-made moldings. Instead, Bennett decorated a cabinet door and four drawers with painted teardrop shapes. John Kelsey argued that this lighter, more visually playful cabinet better

fits with Bennett's *oeuvre*, underscoring the commentary in the *Nail Cabinet*.¹⁰⁸ Still, the paint—anathema to “woody” furniture makers—contributed to his iconoclastic position. Not only did he paint the wood, but he decorated it too.

Other furniture makers joined Bennett in repudiating Modernism as they experimented with new materials, color and surface decoration. We saw above how Tommy Simpson exhibited painted furniture even in the 1960s, but the trend did not gain momentum until the late 1970s. When Wendy Maruyama began making furniture in the seventies, she felt jealous of all the color that other crafts genres (ceramics, glass, textiles, etc.) played with but “it seemed like color was not an option in furniture design.”¹⁰⁹ Articles about Mitch Ryerson and Tom Loeser note that when they began training at PIA in the late 1970s and early '80s, it was only folk artists who felt free to paint their wood and for anyone else it was a “radical act.”¹¹⁰

While painting wood may have been radical in the late 1970s, it had ample historical precedent. In 1977, in the midst of woody purism in craft furniture, Lloyd Herman curated *Paint on Wood: Decorated American Furniture Since the 17th Century* at the Renwick Gallery.¹¹¹ The catalog displayed many early American painted furniture pieces but offered few contemporary examples besides the work of Tommy Simpson. Perhaps because of this dearth or the quirky nature of the contemporary pieces, the catalog failed to outline any connection between current and historical pieces besides the craftsmen's choices to paint their wood.

Most likely, the weak connection reflects the fact that craft furniture still predominately prized natural wood into the 1980s. The American Craft Council's 1979 show *New Handmade Furniture: American Furniture Makers Working in Hardwood*

celebrated natural wood, even in the catalog design. The publisher constructed the catalog cover from a thin piece of oak veneer on paper, wrapping from the back to part of the front. They clipped the bottom right corner of the veneer to reveal a drawn border of a dovetail below. Before looking at the opening statement, one can see that the “work clearly illustrates [the maker’s] sensitive love for the beauty of natural woods.”¹¹²

Yet, as the 1970s moved in to the 1980s, more woodworkers (including highly trained ones) forayed into the taboo land of painting and decorating their furniture. Alphonse Mattia began playing with color in 1979, out of the same jealousy for other crafts that his student Wendy Maruyama expressed. He wanted his work to stand out and offer something other than the wood worship otherwise prevalent in the field¹¹³

Although Mattia attributed this interest in color to his admiration for Garry Knox Bennett’s and Wendy Maruyama’s boundary-pushing work, in a 2009 oral history Maruyama recalled that Mattia inspired her choice to use color.¹¹⁴ She first studied with Mattia at Virginia Commonwealth University, then followed him to PIA in Boston to improve her technical knowledge. After two years, she enrolled at the School for American Craftsmen (SAC) at the Rochester Institute of Technology and here played with decoration. While there, Maruyama made the *Writing Table* (fig. 9) that shared the September 1980 back cover of *Fine Woodworking* with the *Nail Cabinet*. On the surface of her triangular maple desk top, she painted six purple parallelograms: indicators for placement of the blind tenons that connect the legs to the top. This decoration in itself tells a joke: Maruyama hid the tenons joining the boards by not bringing them fully to the surface. She then “revealed” the hidden joints by highlighting their placement in purple paint, adding a few decorative squiggles. Above all this, she scribbled a long, flying “W”