

in green crayon. To ensure that some exuberant child had not mistaken her maple for drawing paper, Maruyama then lacquered the surface.¹¹⁵ Her decoration toyed with furniture making techniques while playfully rejecting the entrenched belief that wood ought not be painted.

Furniture maker Tom Loeser, who studied at PIA after Maruyama, also began to explore paint as decoration on wood. When asked what drew him to use color in his furniture, Loeser recalled simply that he and his fellow students chose to play with the design possibilities that color afforded. He observed that the species of wood “occupy a very narrow range of the color wheel” and as he became interested in Josef Albers’ color theory, he desired “access to that whole other three quarters of the color wheel.” His teachers neither encouraged color exploration in their assignments nor discouraged painting wood; any choice to use color had to be deliberate and in the service of “aesthetic coherence.”¹¹⁶

Students like Loeser found additional encouragement with the then popular Memphis, which they encountered in Italian shelter magazines like *Domus* and *Abitare*.¹¹⁷ While Loeser did not appreciate the Memphis designs as such, the way that these Italian designers used color, surface decoration and unconventional forms broke open the field, “liberating” Loeser and others, showing new possibilities.¹¹⁸ Wendy Maruyama felt like she had already come to color and play in her work when she encountered Memphis; she says “it was sort of like a justification,” a promise that “it’s going to be OK to do this kind of work.”¹¹⁹

In 1983, *Fine Woodworking* addressed how some studio furniture makers had turned to painting their wood. Following a show called “Color/Wood” organized by

maker James Schriber at the Brookfield, CT Craft Center, Roger Holmes wrote “Color and Wood; Dyeing for a Change,” introducing the new trend. Holmes quipped: “ever since the current craft revival floated to America on a sea of Danish oil, clear wood finishes have seemed sacrosanct.”¹²⁰ Sacrosanct indeed. He credited this new rebellion to postmodernism as it threatened the modernist interest in truth to materials.

As truth to materials became less important, furniture makers incorporated other materials than wood—or paint—into their work. Mitch Ryerson, as we shall see in Chapter Two, incorporated found objects into his furniture to craft a narrative. After adding his inflammatory metal nail to the padauk cabinet in 1979, Garry Knox Bennett made many desks and other pieces of furniture using aluminum and plastic laminates. In a 1990 article in *Southern Accents*, Nancy Ruhling described the second-generation craft furniture makers not as woodworkers, but as makers who “embrace a variety of materials—brick, aluminum, brass and copper, plastic laminate, acrylic and milk paints, faux granite, pigmented epoxy, and, of course, woods and wood veneers.”¹²¹

When Pritam and Eames Gallery invited John Dunnigan to participate in their 1982 show *Work from the Masters*, he took the opportunity to use material to comment on the state of the art and the “sanctification of wood.”¹²² Dunnigan carefully crafted a “serious” table in wenge and purpleheart. He then contrasted these tropical woods with a touch of pink plastic.¹²³ For Dunnigan, this little rebellion came in part from a desire to offer an original contribution to studio furniture but also from his interest in the rich, luxuriousness of eighteenth-century French furniture.¹²⁴ When historian Oscar Fitzgerald asked about the artist’s influences, Dunnigan acknowledged the postmodern rejection of modernism and the way the former celebrated historical references and new materials.

Although Dunnigan held his teacher Tage Frid and his work in the highest esteem, Dunnigan reacted against the conservatism of Frid and others. Dunnigan recalled to Fitzgerald how he made elegant furniture with rich upholstery to “be less woody and less macho than Frid” and other craftsmen.¹²⁵

In the 1980s, museums, galleries and industry recognized this general trend toward new materials. In 1983, the Formica Corporation sponsored an exhibition, *Surface and Ornament*, in which architects and designers envisioned designs for a new plastic laminate product: ColorCore. After *Surface and Ornament*, Formica partnered with the Workbench Gallery in New York, this time for furniture makers to play with the material. Following an instructional workshop in October 1983, Workbench Gallery directors Bernice Wollman and Judy Coady wrote the nineteen participants, encouraging exploration with ColorCore: “We believe the designers and architects who have experimented with this material have failed in their explorations. Now, real furniture makers will have their turn.”¹²⁶

Wollman and Coady selected the craft furniture makers for *Material Evidence: Fine Woodworkers Explore ColorCore* while Formica supplied them with the laminate.¹²⁷ ColorCore, no longer manufactured, came in 94 different colors and could be worked much like wood. In the catalog, Susan Grant Lewin of the Formica Corporation noted that it “can be routed, etched, layered, and even broken into shards to create a new repertoire of surface effects.”¹²⁸ By layering pieces of laminate and routing through the top layer, Wendy Maruyama exposed contrasting colors and created textural depth and decoration with her “Highgirl” (fig. 10). Tom Loeser used small chips of the color laminate (fig. 11), creating the kind of patchwork grid he might otherwise meticulously

craft with milk paint. Mitch Ryerson chose to weave strips of the thin material into latticework, ornamenting his colorful *Hall Piece* (fig. 12).¹²⁹

Following the show at the Workbench Gallery, April 11-May 17, 1984, the show traveled to twelve cities over two years, beginning at the Renwick Gallery in 1985.¹³⁰ The corresponding catalog for *Material Evidence: New Color Techniques in Handmade Furniture* put the work in the context of postmodernism. Wollman and Coady particularly noted the way many makers chose to incorporate historical elements into their furniture, like Michael Pierschalla's nod to Charles Rennie Mackintosh with a pair of high-backed chairs (*Pair of Chairs*). "*Material Evidence*," they wrote, "did, after all, open within a few months and a few miles of Philip Johnson's AT&T Building—a Chippendale skyscraper." Although they acknowledged that color in furniture was not new, Wollman and Coady wrote that the show's colorfulness "contrasts with the cool minimalism of the International Style."¹³¹

When Stephen Bayley, director of the Boilerhouse Project of the Victoria & Albert Museum, selected six works from *Material Evidence* for an exhibition, he titled the show *Post Modern Colour*. In addition to the American craft furniture maker's pieces, Bayley included British and French explorations in ColorCore, as well as selections from *Surface and Ornament*. *Post Modern Colour* displayed the vibrant furniture in London from November 1984 to January 1985.¹³²

In 1985, Robert Janjigian guest curated *Material Pleasures: Furniture for a Postmodern Age* at the Queens Museum. The show explored furniture displaying "a provocative use of material or materials in combination." Janjigian's interest lay in how designers went "beyond the Modernist tradition to what one might call a *postmodernist*

tradition relating, out of context, to McLuhan: The Medium is the Message—The Message is the Medium.” The exhibit blended different realms of furniture design, combining work of craftspersons, artists, architects and designers. Tom Loeser and Wendy Maruyama represented the craft world, while Frank Gehry and Stanley Tigerman, among others, represented architects. Some of the furniture had even been made with ColorCore.¹³³

Robert Janjigian displayed further interest in this new material expression in design with his 1987 book *High Touch: The New Materialism in Design*. In the introduction to the book, artist Ivy Ross compared a designer’s approach to material selection to a painter at her palette. Rather than use materials to celebrate technological progress, designers employed them for their communicative and expressive properties. While many materials in the book (*e.g.*, plastic, rubber, galvanized steel, Plexiglass) result from technological development, Janjigian maintained that the High Touch movement offered a response to “technology and blank-box modernism.” “Above all,” he wrote, “High Touch is designed to communicate.” By combining different materials in new ways, designers could engage new meanings and content.¹³⁴

The turn to new materials in craft furniture certainly reflected a postmodern sensibility. As makers like John Dunnigan rejected the field’s woody focus, they engaged in a small postmodern rebellion. Janjigian’s *High Touch* and the exhibit *Material Pleasures* demonstrate that, while the reasons and methods may have differed, craft furniture makers, designers and architects each participated in the trend toward using new materials to express ideas.

In further rebellion against the Modernist impulses of first-generation furniture makers, some second-generation makers also embraced ornament and decoration. In a 1980 article in the inaugural *Metalsmith* magazine, Bruce Metcalf advocated ornamentation in crafts, arguing that it fulfilled a “human need for complexity and contrast.”¹³⁵ While studio furniture of the 1950s and 1960s offered a warmer, gentler solution to the austere modernism, makers in the 1970s and 1980s yearned to express more with their furniture and in so doing, turned to ornament and decoration.

In 1983, the same year that architects contributed to the *Surface and Ornament* exhibition, Pritam and Eames Gallery on Long Island launched a show exploring this new decorative interest. Co-owners Bebe and Warren Johnson, attuned to the mostly second-generation makers they represented, observed a collective interest in ornamentation. *Post-Modern Embellishment* acknowledged the trend. While no catalogue accompanied the show, the Pritam & Eames online archives states the exhibition “focused on the decorated surface, and the use of paint, epoxy resin, gold, ebony, and carving.” Wendy Maruyama’s writing table with decorative crayon scrawl offered a particular well-known example (fig. 12).¹³⁶

In the Pritam & Eames archives, Bebe and Warren Johnson place the show in the context of the pattern and decoration movement, also called “Ornamentalism.” In their 1982 book *Ornamentalism: The New Decorativeness in Architecture and Design*, Robert Jensen and Patricia Conway used this term to characterize the “fascination with the surface of things as opposed to their essence; elaboration as opposed to simplicity; borrowing as opposed to originating; sensory stimulation as opposed to intellectual discipline.”¹³⁷ They observed the trend in architecture, design and studio crafts.

While today these characteristics offer stylistic descriptors for postmodernism, Jensen and Conway argued: “despite the fact that ornamentalism rejects the modernist proscription against ornament, it is not ‘postmodern’ or even antimodern at all.” Ornamentalism, they argued, may have reacted against “the more obvious failures of Modernism, but it [was] not a wholesale rejection of Modernism.” Rather, they argued that designers turned to ornament to “keep...other Modern ideals alive.” Jensen and Conway only extrapolated to say that ornamentalism offered “the first serious attempt in fifty years to make Modernism keep its promise of projecting new possibilities, of showing us some release from the burdensome realities of the present.”¹³⁸

Arguably, postmodernism did continue the modernist project by trying to constantly create something new with the infinite permutations that historical content offers.¹³⁹ However, the turn to the past with ornamentation implicitly signaled the belief that the constant development of the “new” was no longer possible. While Jensen and Conway argued that ornamentalism remained firmly in the world of modernism, the characteristics they articulated fall directly in the camp of postmodern, as discussed in architecture.¹⁴⁰ These trends also happened in studio furniture as makers took up painting and carving wood and employed new materials like metal or cardboard to create decorative furniture. For an example, see Figure 13, which illustrates Judy Kinsley McKie’s carved and painted *Leopard Chest*.

Where did the turn to ornament come from? If modernism had eschewed it (“Ornament is a crime,” railed Adolf Loos) and even the softer, user-friendly Scandinavian Modern that so influenced studio furniture avoided it, what encouraged ornament’s return? One of the complaints about modernism lay in its failures of scale.

Jensen and Conway argued that contrary to the sleek, towering modernist skyscrapers, buildings with ornament offer a human scale by separating the structure into people-sized pieces. Ornament provides a “visual reference against which [people] can measure themselves and not feel overpowered.”¹⁴¹ Yet, furniture does not require such assistance. We relate to furniture with our bodies when we stand beside or sit on it; ornament cannot mediate such close scale.

Rather, Bruce Metcalf built off architect Robert Venturi when he argued that humans need the complexity ornament affords. Venturi wrote a widely-read criticism of ornament-less architecture: *Complexity and Contradiction* (1966). In this book written to an audience of architects, Venturi argued that architecture should reconsider its position on tradition, offering instead a “gentle manifesto” for all the variety and complexity architecture needs. On the one hand, he argued “blatant simplification means bland architecture. Less is a bore.” Ultimately, however, Venturi encouraged architects to design and build buildings appropriate to their time. Modern architects like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe responded to the complex and confusing modern world by trying to impose architectural order. Instead, Venturi thought: “When circumstances defy order, order should bend or break: anomalies and uncertainties give validity to architecture.” Art should mirror life.¹⁴²

Instead of a rigid new order, Venturi advocated combining various familiar, historical architectural elements into a “unique whole,” adding new elements “when the old won’t do.” Such elaborate combinations benefit from the compositional tension. Especially by contrasting complex, historical elements in buildings, an architect can signify a variety of meanings. He can then communicate interesting, complex ideas with

an amalgamation of signifiers. “If,” Venturi suggests, an architect “uses convention unconventionally, if he organizes familiar things in an unfamiliar way, he is changing their contexts, and he can use even the cliché to gain a fresh effect.” Venturi valued the communicative abilities of these design permutations.¹⁴³

Originally published in 1966 and republished in 1977, *Complexity and Contradiction* greatly affected the way architects began to think and feel about—and use—ornament. The visual conversation in the building arts began to change. Craftspersons again reclaimed ornament as well, contributing to the postmodern rejection of sterile modernism.

Outright statements of discontent, like Bennett’s *Nail Cabinet*, along with subtler responses with paint, materials other than wood, and ornamentation reflect but one way in which craft furniture makers contributed to the postmodern movement. With these new tools and topics for conversation (furniture itself), makers began to explore new content. Craftsmen like Mitch Ryerson, as we will see in Chapter Two, blurred the lines between craft and communicative art while remaining dedicated to furniture’s functionality.

Chapter 2

A New Purpose for Furniture: Communicating Ideas

When architect Charles Jencks wrote *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* articulating new trends in the field, he also critiqued the failures of modernism. Modernism's inability to appropriately and effectively communicate with its audience featured particularly high among Jencks' complaints. Jencks used Gordon Bunshaft's Hirshhorn Museum on the Washington Mall to demonstrate how an architect who does not fully consider the communicative properties of his designs may instead create "inadvertent meanings." The "simplified shape" of "a white masonry cylinder," he wrote "was meant to communicate power, awe, harmony and the sublime. And so it does." Yet, journals like *Time* saw that, "with its battered walls, impenetrable heaviness and 360-degree machine-gun slit, it symbolizes more accurately a Normandy pillbox." Thus, Bunshaft's unintentional message became "'keep modern art from the people and open fire if they approach'." Jencks noted that the building employed popular, recognizable codes, or architectural language. He concluded: "Had the designer intended the idea of an elitist bunker, it might have been an ironic and multivalent statement of this notion, but, as with the unintended witticisms of Mrs. Malaprop, all credit for humor must go to the subconscious."¹⁴⁴

Failing to account for potential double-meanings and double-functions in structures can lead to visual Malapropisms. To harness these communicative properties, Robert Venturi advocated an intentional "both-and" architecture, employing "varying levels of meanings" when he wrote *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.¹⁴⁵

Particularly, the ornament and contradictory juxtapositions that modernism eschewed could offer tools for a more intentional effort at such communication.

Craft furniture makers in the late 1970s and 1980s also began to engage ornament, as we saw in the last chapter. Sometimes this took the form of decorative carving or paint. Sometimes makers deliberately employed familiar elements to craft a narrative. Cambridge, MA furniture maker Mitch Ryerson recognized how found objects carried their own associations and meanings and that by drawing on these, a furniture designer could tell a story. In an article following the 1985 *Material Evidence* show, Patricia Dane Rogers quoted Ryerson to say: “people need reference points. They like to find history and the human level in design. They are starved for it.”¹⁴⁶ Ryerson provided familiar reference points in his 1986 *Washboard Children’s Highchair*, using found objects to create a story in a functional piece of furniture (fig. 14).

The *Washboard Children’s Highchair* addresses Ryerson’s experience as a new father and some of the mundane messiness of life that entails. When Ryerson built the chair, he documented its development. The resulting slide show narrates his process.¹⁴⁷ The slides progressed from feeding his daughter in a high chair, to piles of laundry, then diapers drying on the line in a Cambridge winter. Then, the family visited Child World to investigate the kinds of high chairs available. From there, Ryerson traveled to the neighborhood hardware store, where he spied a washboard in the display window. Inside the store, Ryerson found three options for washboards. Next, he ventured to the local laundromat and scavenged discarded laundry soapboxes from the trash. Finding this promising, he visited the neighborhood grocer to discover a range of larger, cardboard detergent boxes.

Following this investigative process, the slideshow documented the chair's construction. In these slides, the chair builds itself, starting with four carefully turned legs, joined with four small strips of wood, slatted through the legs. A smoothly shaped seat stabilizes and joins the legs, then three dowels span between the front and back chair rails. By protruding from the front rail, these three dowels then offer a support for the toddler's foot rest. Ryerson carefully fitted selected laundry labels onto the flat rails. He also framed such labels inside the two panels that hug the sides of the seat. Ryerson used clothespins (the purely wooden variety) as spindle supports for the wooden arms. The hardware store's washboard created a tall, imposing back for the chair, displaying the words "Maid Rite" with a black and red sunburst emanating from the washboard and shield logo. Finally, he lined the feeding tray with the front of an Ivory Snow box. This tray slides along the arms and can be secured at the desired distance with a brass eye-bolt.

In his *Highchair*, Ryerson made a functional piece of furniture that also tells a story. He implied a clear narrative with the materials he chose. The laundry boxes, the clothespins and the washboard all immediately communicate that this piece relates to washing clothes. Yet, the furniture form is also familiar to viewers; they know that highchairs are for holding and feeding children, not an accessory for the laundry chore. In this juxtaposition, Ryerson's *Highchair* winks at the viewer, indicating there is more to the chair than its function or intriguing found objects. Ryerson's wink says, "It's all right; I know what I'm doing. Watch and find out." With children (the 48" tall chair's obvious intended users), the feeding and laundry cycle are integrally connected. With this connection in Ryerson's *Highchair*, one can begin to feel a new parent's despair at the amount of dirty laundry a child learning to eat can make, then the additional diaper