

Chapter 3

A Return to History with Irony: Historicism in Craft Furniture

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, “I love you madly,” because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still there is a solution. He can say, “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.” At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.

~Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*¹⁷⁹

In trying to articulate postmodernism’s relationship to the past, Umberto Eco acknowledged that “the past...cannot really be destroyed,” “the already said...cannot be eliminated.” All creation, thinking, knowledge and language builds upon itself. The postmodern world became characterized by a great consciousness, an awareness that complete originality was impossible. Instead, artists began to consciously quote their sources. Yet, in postmodern productions, the irony with which artists—including furniture makers—addressed the past makes each quotation like a wink, drawing on shared historical awareness. The artists were not naïve and unaware and they knew their audience was not either.

In studio furniture, many second-generation makers quite deliberately used historical quotes and references as elements for communication in their furniture. Like postmodern architects, they created content that acknowledged what past furniture forms

and designs, as well as popular culture, could signify. However, first-generation craftsmen George Nakashima and Tage Frid also took influence from traditional and historical furniture (like that of the Shakers).¹⁸⁰ Additionally, reproduction furniture making also remained important during the twentieth century. These approaches to history and tradition in furniture, however, differ from the ironic and deliberate historicism of postmodernism.

In 1980, John Kelsey reported in *Fine Woodworking* about a landmark conference for studio furniture makers. “Wood ’79: The State of the Art” gathered professional woodworkers, amateur craftsmen, students and instructors to SUNY Purchase for three days in October 1979 to network, learn techniques, and discuss the “state of the art.”¹⁸¹ In a panel discussion about design, Kelsey reported that “furniture sculptor Wendell Castle of Scottsville, N.Y., led off by contending that his ilk were ahead of painters and architects in creating postmodern art.”¹⁸² At this time, Wendell Castle (a bridge between first-generation and second-generation makers) had taken a complete turn in his artistic work. Whereas his pieces of the 1960s and earlier 1970s exhibited a perfectly ahistorical, free-form sculptural quality, in the late 1970s he made a small series of illusionistic works which built upon historical furniture as well as simple, recognizable furniture forms (like a coat rack and basic side chair). For example, his 1980 “Jacobean Table with Books and Glasses” employs the ornamented, turned legs of Jacobean period furniture along with a scalloped skirt. On top of the table, Castle and his assistants carved two books, one open with a pair of spectacle frames resting on top.¹⁸³ Castle acknowledges that using familiar, traditional forms was absolutely necessary in making the trompe l’œil successful. If the table looked familiar, then people would not look too closely and

the skillful carving could succeed that much longer at fooling the eye.¹⁸⁴ These pieces reflected a drastic shift in Castle's relationship to historical forms at a time when postmodern art and architecture engaged history and the past in new ways.¹⁸⁵ The way that he very deliberately called on history reflected an attuned awareness to the role history can have in artistic communication.

Modernism tried to wipe history from the design vocabulary. Postmodern architects like Robert Venturi, Charles Jencks, and Charles Moore saw the value of relating to the past with their designs. While first-generation furniture makers like Sam Maloof and Art Carpenter tried to create their own modern designs, other small-scale craft shops and amateur woodworkers made reproductions of historical pieces.¹⁸⁶ When *Fine Woodworking* began in 1975, its first issues included articles about historical styles and makers (e.g. Gustav Stickley, Spring 1976; Queen Anne, Summer 1976; Greene & Greene, September 1978) as well as technical information that pertained to historical styles, one of which was a Spring 1978 article about carving ball and claw feet. In a January 1979 article "Design Sources: Conventions Stand in for Genius," Cary Hall suggested that amateur woodworkers should derive inspiration from the past.¹⁸⁷ Many subscribers to the magazine did. However, reproduction furniture in the 1970s and 1980s did not arise from a postmodern impulse against modernism, nor did it seek to express the same ideas as postmodern furniture. Both value the past. Reproduction furniture, however, nostalgically reproduces styles and production methods from the past without deliberate irony.¹⁸⁸

In contrast, many makers in the studio furniture movement strove for originality in furniture forms. For first-generation makers to do something original and new meant

diverging from the revival styles that remained popular during the twentieth century. The sleek, clean lines of Scandinavian Modern offered a way to sculpt unique, functional furniture. Yet, by the 1960s and 1970s, makers required new ways of being original and creative. To this end, several makers began to reference historical styles and periods along with popular culture (something to which art and architecture also turned).

Edward Zucca (b. 1946) came into furniture making at the Philadelphia College of Art (PCA) in the late 1960s and his work helps articulate studio furniture's reclaimed relationship to history, with an ironic wink. During Zucca's tenure at PCA, from 1964-1968, he studied under furniture maker Dan Jackson. While Zucca received instruction in art history and took a course in the history of film, Jackson did not teach the students about furniture history. For Jackson, teaching such history would have meant putting ideas into students' heads. Rather, in an interview with the author, Zucca observed that Jackson taught his students to be creative and not copy others, to generate their own unique artwork.¹⁸⁹

For Zucca, being creative and doing his own work often involved making references to history or popular culture, particularly the futuristic envisionings of his 1950s childhood. Robots featured prominently in many of his creations (see fig. 19, *Mystery Robots Rip Off the Rainforest*, for example), but the scientific "hardware" like ray guns or the Interocitor communication device and weapon from the 1955 science fiction film *This Island Earth*, have also appeared in Zucca's designs.¹⁹⁰ He says that his work has involved "taking little bits of things from everywhere and assembling them into a new creature, especially," he emphasizes, when creating "the historical stuff." Today, Zucca likens the process to constructing a puzzle where the pieces "could be anything."

Often, he says, the resulting image is a three-dimensional political cartoon. The act of gathering the pieces to communicate in this satirical way is “like an exercise” for Zucca, but one always approached with a sense of humor.

Just as Robert Venturi and Charles Jencks encouraged architects to see how familiar historical and popular references in architecture could help communicate with the public, Zucca incorporated familiar elements to make wry social commentary in his furniture. His 1979 *Shaker Television* epitomizes the way craft furniture can reference history—specifically the history of furniture making—to make a joke or social commentary. While first-generation makers like George Nakashima, James Krenov and Tage Frid appreciated the clean, simple lines and solid construction of traditional Shaker furniture, Ed Zucca appreciated what the historical period could communicate.

In making *Shaker Television* (fig. 21), Zucca consciously drew on Shaker styles and careful craftsmanship while gently subverting history with a deliberate anachronism. This witty piece looks like a box television on a stand, but closer inspection reveals this furniture requires no electronic circuitry to communicate with an audience. Using wood and references to history and pop culture, Zucca envisioned what a television might look like had the famous furniture making religious group owned one.

In *Shaker Television*, on the right side of the maple stand, Zucca built a simple drawer with a single knob on the face. From first glance, this drawer offers the only hint that the piece might function, yet Zucca hinged the top of the television portion to provide storage behind the television screen.¹⁹¹ To allude to a speaker grille, Zucca fitted a panel of woven Shaker seat tape into the front of the stand. This and the drawer sit

inside the mortise and tenon frame, secured together with tiny pegs. The four squared legs taper cleanly to the floor.

Using maple to construct the simple, box-shaped television, Zucca joined the side panels using dovetails. In the process of finishing the wood, the end grain absorbed finish, becoming darker than the face of the boards. In this way, the dovetails contrast prominently against the maple surface. Zucca used a sliding dovetail to secure two edge boards to the television top, creating a slight overhang and visually framing the piece. Again, the finish highlighted the ends of the sliding dovetails, helping visually emphasize the construction method and connection to historic Shaker furniture. Five routed slits on the television sides would offer ventilation if the stand held a real television.

On the right side of the television front, Zucca placed six simple, turned Shaker drawer pulls in a column. A large knob commands the prominent position at the top of the column, above four small pulls, with a medium size pull at the bottom. On the television, these Shaker pulls become television knobs and buttons. Under this column, Zucca applied an oval-shaped Shaker trade mark label in gold leaf: “SHAKER’S/ TRADE (image of rocking chair) MARK/ MT. LEBANON. NY.” Authenticity does not matter here, only that the image creates irony and tension in the anachronism.¹⁹²

While this label—coupled with the drawer-pull knobs and dovetails—obviously references Shaker style furniture, Zucca’s clever television screen delivers the punch line. In a rounded-out shape to the left of the knobs, Zucca veneered a piece of zebrawood so that its characteristic striped grain runs horizontally. Using the materials and techniques of his field, Zucca beautifully created a television that displays no picture, only static. In discussing his process of making the piece, Zucca said that he considered what the

Shakers would have watched had they had television. He wanted to use the zebrawood, but after inlaying it for the screen, he realized that to add anything else would “wreck it.” In *The Maker’s Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940-1990*, Edward Cooke et al. suggest that the television expresses Zucca’s belief that were the Shakers to have had TV, they would have chosen to watch static.¹⁹³ The artist noted that an “accidental bonus” in the piece comes in the idea that Shakers might have even opted to watch static to aid in meditation or prayer.

Many layers wittily contribute to the concept of *Shaker Television*. Zucca engaged in historicism by referencing an American style of furniture making as he built a form strikingly anachronistic to the Shaker furniture tradition. While understanding the joke requires knowledge of history, Zucca referenced enough of the traditional Shaker style to bring the historical group to mind. For those less versed in “reading” furniture, the trademark label and title offer direct insight. Even the most historically ignorant viewer can engage with the piece, recognizing the ubiquitous television form and its unusual treatment. Postmodern architects Charles Jencks and Robert Venturi strongly advocated combining high and low culture like this in order to reach a broader audience.

By consciously and loudly calling on history in this still-functional piece of studio furniture, Ed Zucca engaged in the postmodern trend of historicism.¹⁹⁴ Unlike modernists who shied from acknowledging any precedents to their work, Zucca fully engaged the past as he asked the bizarre question of what a Shaker television would look like and what Shakers would have watched. Like a skillful poet selecting his words, Zucca mined the Shaker woodworking vocabulary for pieces that would resonate with his historical collage.¹⁹⁵ Zucca acknowledged that it is important to copy history fairly accurately

because “if you mess around with it too much, then nobody knows what it’s supposed to be.”¹⁹⁶ In work like the *Shaker Television*, he added enough of a twist, however, that no one could accuse him of lacking originality.

While some critics faulted postmodernism for “ransacking the past,” Zucca and some of his fellow studio furniture makers did it for new effect.¹⁹⁷ In a 1983 *Fine Woodworking* article, Roger Holmes was one of the first to explore this postmodern tendency for the magazine’s readers. While his article “Color and Wood; Dyeing for a Change” was not the first mention of the word “postmodern” in this woodworking magazine, it was the first article that really sought to outline and describe trends as “postmodern” within the field. Holmes informed his readers that “Post-Modern designers quarry the past for inspiration and material—anything from a concept to a column—just as the Romans mined the Greeks, and the Renaissance mined the Romans.” Yet, unlike some of the past revivals Holmes mentions, “any period is fair game today.” Here, Holmes tried to assuage the traditionalists’ and modernists’ concerns alike. He noted a precedence for such historical borrowing: even the all-revered Romans stole designs. Of the pieces in the show, Holmes noted that “pirated elements are seldom used as they were in the original.” Rather, “stripped of their original purposes, separated from familiar surroundings, the elements can be used as symbols or used for their decorative qualities.” He observed: “This can be subtle or blatant, playful or serious. When it’s done well, the whole is greater than the sum of its pilfered parts.” Indeed, skillful miners like Ed Zucca were able to gather historical elements in a decidedly conscious way to create entirely new concepts in their artwork. Unlike revival styles that referenced the past for aesthetic

or nostalgic reasons, studio furniture makers were able to address the past with irony, in the postmodern relationship to history that Umberto Eco describes.¹⁹⁸

In part, the turn to history came in response to modernism while still adhering to the modernist push for constant originality. In 1990, Lloyd Herman offered a slightly different perspective for why American craftsmakers especially took up “rampant style-revivalism” in the 1980s. He noted in *Art that Works: The Decorative Arts of the Eighties, Crafted in America* that inspiration could come from all sources because the United States has “no single craft tradition” and thus “American craftsmen are not limited to a single style or prescribed way of working.” Certainly the European émigrés who came from strong cultural crafts traditions (including Tage Frid and James Krenov in woodworking) greatly enhanced the amount of technical knowledge available to American craftspersons. Yet, the newness of the United States created a culture of possibility. In *Art that Works*, Herman suggested that American makers at the time “consider[ed] the world and its visual history to be fair game for their own interpretations,” yet they succeeded in making unique work, distinguishable from that of the past.¹⁹⁹

Fourteen years earlier, the catalog for *American Crafts '76: An Aesthetic View* helped explain the mechanism for some of this historical influence. The catalog observed: “Craftsmakers today have available far more resources than ever before,” including an array of writings about “process and materials” and “documentation of the achievements of past cultures.” In addition, the increased ability for international travel also allowed for wider accessibility to historical places and cultures.²⁰⁰

The *Shaker Television* has attracted public attention since the Workbench Gallery displayed it in a one-man show of Zucca's work in 1981.²⁰¹ The gallery highlighted the *Shaker Television* and a "rough bench whose unfinished pine top is pierced by legs which are carved and painted to simulate metal nails" in a press release issued April 9, 1981.²⁰² A week later, Suzanne Slesin featured the *Television* in the *New York Times* "Home Beat."²⁰³ When the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston mounted *The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940-1990*, they included Zucca's *Shaker Television* among a selection of 54 furniture objects.

In 1981, following the show at Workbench, both *American Craft* and *Fine Woodworking* ran profiles of Ed Zucca, each highlighting the *Television* as an example of his work. The *Fine Woodworking* article noted: "The eclectic Zucca calls himself a 'post modernist'."²⁰⁴ When asked what this meant to him, Zucca said that he probably did not know the meaning of the term then and does not know now, adding: "I don't like labels like that." Regardless of label, the way Zucca ironically engaged historical content, pushed beyond the first-generation in form, content and materials, used furniture to tell jokes and communicate ideas, and took interest in multi-layered yet accessible meanings all demonstrate a new direction in studio furniture for the 1970s and 1980s.

Michael Stone's 1981 profile "Skill at Play: Edward Zucca" in *American Craft* discussed a particular recurring theme in Zucca's work: "his sardonic feeling toward television." Stone quoted Zucca to say: "I despise it. Using a Shaker design was perfect, because if the Shakers were still around, they would hate television, too."²⁰⁵ Zucca created other anachronistic televisions in addition to the *Shaker Television*. They each question what a given society's relationship to television would be.

Collector Ron Abramson commissioned Zucca to create a piece of furniture for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.²⁰⁶ In response, Zucca made *XVIIIth Dynasty Television* (fig. 22) in 1989. With the television surrounded by four columns suggesting a temple and a gold leaf rounded disc for the screen, this Egyptian television receives royal treatment. On the television's side, Zucca even created a raised hieroglyphic shape of a hand holding a plug. (The horizontally zig-zagging arm seems much like the hieroglyphic symbol for water and the plug resembles a "cobra-at-rest"; one wonders if this gold leaf image is an instruction guarding against—or even sardonically promoting—electrocution.)²⁰⁷

Again in 1993, Zucca revisited impossible televisions with *Caveman Television* (fig. 23) for a show at the Peter Joseph Gallery. In this, he used all-natural materials including a rock screen, antler antennae, bone control switches and a sinew-over-hide speaker grille. His 1996 *Television from Ancient Rome* suggested that the Romans would have watched gladiator fights at the Colosseum from the comfort of their own home. In the artistic borrowing common in postmodern art, Zucca incorporated a black and white print of Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1872 painting *Pollice Verso* ("Thumbs Down") for the screen image.

With his recurring interest in this cultural icon, one wonders why Zucca expresses such animosity toward the appliance. While he watched a "fair amount" of TV as a kid, he worries that television corrupts and stifles creativity. He fears that watching it opens a person to all sorts of unsolicited information and violence. In fact, in 1981, Zucca says he had bumper stickers made to read "Kill Your Television."²⁰⁸ The animosity clearly borders on fascination. Zucca's living room contains four television sets grouped together

and his office holds a few miniature, toy sets. Zucca and his wife, artist Kathi Yokum, resisted getting a television until finally giving in a few years after their son was born in the mid-1980s.²⁰⁹

While Ed Zucca's *Shaker Television* epitomizes the way furniture makers wittily drew on the past, neither the piece nor Zucca stand alone in this postmodern trend. Wendy Maryuama's *Mickey Mackintosh* chair (fig. 24), first made in 1981, has claimed the attention of many a writer and curator of art furniture. In his 1983 grumblings in *Fine Woodworking* against "Artiture," furniture maker Art Carpenter described encountering Maruyama's rectilinear tall-backed chair with misgivings. The chair's split back arcs out into two round discs at the top, in a pop culture reference to Disney's famous mouse; this resemblance frustrated Carpenter. When he learned from Maruyama that she had intended the Mickey Mouse reference, he saw the chair with better humor, understanding it "as a parody of the regality and puffery of high-backed chairs."²¹⁰ Maruyama double-coded her chair with references to high and low culture. For those educated in furniture or design history, the chair's tall back that extends to the floor carries strong connection to Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret McDonald Mackintosh's designs as well as those of Frank Lloyd Wright. For the less informed, Mickey Mouse's ears register more loudly.

Cultural and Institutional Historic Interest

Besides its communicative properties, why else did studio furniture makers begin to incorporate history into current work during the 1970s and 1980s? Despite modernism's hold on the arts during the 1950s and 1960s, as the country neared the