

Bicentennial, art museums took the opportunity to reflect on our artistic past. Finch College Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now Museum of Art and Design) mounted a show *Forms in Metal: 275 Years of Metalsmithing in America* in early 1975.<sup>211</sup> Later that year, the public could see silver and gold objects made as early as 1725 in the same exhibit as contemporary works at *Precious Metals: The American Tradition in Gold and Silver* at the Lowe Art Museum in Miami.<sup>212</sup> Cornell University's Museum of Art displayed *The Handwrought Object 1776-1976* in the summer of 1976.<sup>213</sup> In 1977, the Renwick weighed in on the history of furniture with a show *Paint on Wood: Decorated American Furniture Since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*.<sup>214</sup> In this way, contemporary makers' works shared galleries with historical pieces.<sup>215</sup> This exposure, as well as some formal historical education at academic crafts programs would have gently encouraged awareness of the past during the 1970s.

One of the most important exhibitions in the history of studio furniture directly addressed the past's influence on furniture. The very premise of *New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers* incorporated the postmodern turn to history.<sup>216</sup> In October of 1986, Edward S. Cooke, Jr. invited a selection of contemporary furniture makers to participate in a show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA). The prospectus for the exhibition (first called "New Furniture in America") announced: "The intent of the show will be to identify the historical philosophy of the second generation, link the craftsmen [participants] to a continuum of small scale furniture making, and bring together...those interested in contemporary art and those interested in pre-industrial decorative arts."<sup>217</sup> Cooke's daring idea involved inviting 26 furniture makers (two of whom work together as partners) to the MFA for a

two-day symposium in 1987. This would include discussion with curators Jonathan Fairbanks and Edward Cooke about furniture styles, traditions, techniques and social context but also “in-depth analysis of individual pieces of older furniture.”<sup>218</sup> Then, each craftsperson would select a piece of furniture in the museum’s collection to offer inspiration for a new piece that he or she would create for the 1989 exhibition.<sup>219</sup> Not only did the show offer a rare examination of “American contemporary furniture by a major urban museum,” according to Cooke, but the invitational structure also proved unique. Because the show began with a concept rather than a selection of objects, Cooke said in an interview following the show, “this made it risky, but it also made it exciting and timely.”<sup>220</sup>

Part of what made the show so timely was how the very assignment invited furniture makers to mine the past to then create new work. For some, this was a natural extension of their design process. John Dunnigan loved the whole experience, as it combined his interests in history with the opportunity to design and create his own work. Yet, Dunnigan acknowledged that the exhibit was a stretch for many of his colleagues to work in that manner.<sup>221</sup> Thus, while the postmodern interest in history as inspirational source fit makers like John Dunnigan, Wendy Maruyama or Ed Zucca, not all studio furniture makers in the second generation naturally tried to create new forms from past sources.<sup>222</sup>

The show received a great deal of publicity, aided by the prominence of the MFA. Even author John Updike wrote a review of the show for *Art & Antiques* magazine. Regarding the intentional inspiration from the past, Updike wrote: “The exhibit is in this sense thoroughly postmodern, each item deliberately derivative, allusive,

appropriative.”<sup>223</sup> Yet, in this, Updike observed two separate approaches: that of “parody” and that of “homage.” Richard Scott Newman’s work, for example, falls to the category of homage, while Ed Zucca’s *Mystery Robots Rip Off the Rainforest* or John Cederquist’s *The Missing Finial* (the poster highboy for the show, to be discussed in Chapter 4) employ parody.

### **Historical Classicism**

Furniture makers Richard Scott Newman and James Schriber, for example, made furniture during the 1980s that also referenced historical styles and traditions, but followed their own design and aesthetic vision in their furniture. A 1988 review of a show in Mendocino, CA spoke of Richard Scott Newman’s classicism. In his work, the review said, he takes from “the encyclopedia of old forms, shapes, and profiles, yet he seems to be doing it without the superficial mimicry of classical architectural work you see in much of the work of Post-Modern architects.”<sup>224</sup>

For the *New American Furniture* show, Newman designed and built a semi-circular commode (fig. 25) with nods toward the neoclassical style of an 1809 Thomas Seymour commode in the MFA collection. In the catalog, Edward Cooke observed that Newman was “trained in the organic, ahistorical style of Wendell Castle” though turned to “neoclassically inspired furniture in the 1980s.”<sup>225</sup> In his work, Cooke observed that Newman “has pursued alternatives to the shocking, bold, and provocative postures of Modernism.” Thus, second-generation makers responded to modernism in a variety of ways.

James Schriber's contribution to *New American Furniture*, titled *Cupboard* (1989; fig 26), took a basic geometric approach, gently modernizing an eighteenth-century New Hampshire cupboard. Schriber used milk paint to color his wood and added two industrial casters to facilitate mobility. In 1996, Michael Rush wrote a profile for *American Craft* about James Schriber. Because of Schriber's classicist style and references to the past, Rush noted he "earned...the dubious label of 'postmodernist,' though the irony and self-conscious intellectualizing of postmodernism...is totally absent from Schriber's work." Rush ascribed this historical treatment to "training and personal taste" rather than any "conscious attempt on his part to wink at history."<sup>226</sup>

When Wendell Castle began to make more classical, historically inspired pieces in the 1980s, writers for the *New York Times* style section lumped him in with Post-Modern architects like Michael Graves and Charles Moore, among other furniture designers. For example, Marilyn Bethany's "Interior Trends 1984" illustrated Castle's *Demilune Table* (fig. 27). The Brazilian rosewood (solid and veneer) gives this Ruhlmann-esque desk a rich color. Castle highlighted the legs and table edge with a thin outline of inlaid ivory dots. Then, a rounded, carved ivory finial protrudes from the cap of each leg, while similar forms create delicate feet. The piece blends neo-classical form with the decadence of French Art Deco. In Bethany's article, Castle's "Handcrafted" table appeared opposite a paragraph in which she quoted postmodern architect Michael Graves to say: "When we design furniture that must be crafted by hand, rather than machines, we are bucking the tide."<sup>227</sup> Craft furniture makers had engaged in this form of rebellion long before.

Calling this 1980s classicism “postmodern,” however, brought its own conflicts. In an essay “The Career of Wendell Castle” for their book *Furniture by Wendell Castle*, Davira Taragin and Edward Cooke, Jr. acknowledged: “Castle flatly states that he is not a Post-Modernist but a ‘historical classicist’ who abhors the ironic qualities present in much Post-Modernist work.” Then, in the next section they discussed the “cones, columns, and triangular forms that made up the vocabulary of his Post-Modernist furniture.” Joseph Giovannini, later in “Wendell Castle: Occupying the Blur,” noted that in addition to making furniture that blurs the line with sculpture, Castle also “crossed over into Post-Modernist architectural forms.” Certainly, any confusion about what design may or may not be postmodern related to the continued confusion over what the word even meant. Writers and critics haphazardly applied the word “postmodern” as a catchall style descriptor in the 1980s, often disregarding the theoretical and ideological associations with postmodernism.<sup>228</sup>

“Homage” and “parody” helped articulate these two different ways that furniture makers in the 1970s and 1980s incorporated history in their work while still developing original creations. Although completely postmodern in its approach, the *New American Furniture* show ultimately allowed any artistic relationship with history—classicized or with a winking gesture. Ed Zucca’s work, as particularly seen in *The Shaker Television*, helps demonstrate the postmodern interest in “accept[ing] the challenge of the past” while “play[ing] the game of irony,” as Umberto Eco put it.<sup>229</sup> In the next chapter, John Cederquist’s contribution to the *New American Furniture* show will offer yet another way that furniture makers’ interests contributed to postmodern art by asking the question: What is real?

## Chapter 4

### What is Real?: Perception and Reality, Simulacra and Illusion

The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.

~Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*<sup>230</sup>

In the history of artists metaphorically winking at their audience, trompe l'oeil offers a rich example.<sup>231</sup> By creating something in one medium to look like another (usually a two-dimensional painting to represent as realistically as possible a three-dimensional object), artists intentionally tried to “fool the eyes” of their viewers. Yet, such art is all in the service of illusion, wherein the audience becomes complicit in the scheme, brought in by the artist’s gentle wink.<sup>232</sup> Then, with silent applause and appreciation for the artist’s skill, the joke ends.

When California furniture artist John Cederquist’s illusions are discovered, the visual trick has merely begun. Cederquist began making illusionistic, trompe l'oeil furniture in 1981 with his conveniently titled “First Piece.” This coffee table (fig. 28) initiated an exploration of “fixed-point” perspective in three-dimensional furniture forms, wherein Cederquist used inlays, dyes, and the natural figuring and color of the wood to make two-dimensional surfaces in three-dimensional, built furniture look three-dimensional. By the time he created *Le Fleuron Manquant* (*The Missing Finial*) for the 1989 *New American Furniture* show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Cederquist had taken the illusion farther. This piece marks a fully formed engagement with postmodern thoughts and questions that began for Cederquist in the 1970s and he applied to furniture making with *First Piece* in 1981.

Cederquist's work defies easy description in words, yet photographs fail to fully answer the need. Even viewing *The Missing Finial* in person still denies complete elucidation. Engaging physically with work like *The Missing Finial*, for example by opening drawers, helps tell the full story. In a review of *New American Furniture* following its tour to the Oakland Museum in California, Kenneth Baker informed *San Francisco Chronicle* readers: "In photographs—and even firsthand, at any distance—it is hard to distinguish between real and illusionist structure in Cederquist's object."<sup>233</sup> The challenge was entirely intentional: in *The Missing Finial* and earlier pieces, Cederquist played with the way two-dimensional methods of depiction reference three dimensional objects, yet he did so using both two- and three- dimensional structures and methods. Embracing this confusing middle ground, Cederquist speaks about his work as having "two-and-a-half dimensions."<sup>234</sup>

*The Missing Finial* represents a vibrant example of how studio furniture makers in the 1980s engaged with postmodern ideas and concerns. In the retrospective catalog *The Art of John Cederquist: Reality of Illusion*, Arthur C. Danto highlighted two of Cederquist's creations drawn from *Popeye* cartoons. The first emerged from his craft training in leather forming: a pair of shoes based on those worn by the illustrated character Olive Oyl. Made of leather, fabric and crepe rubber, the shoes measure 4 x 6 x 9 inches, making two C shapes when viewed from above. As Danto pointed out, it was the representational relationship between cartoon and sculpture that influenced Cederquist's furniture more than the content. With the pair of two left shoes—in testament to Olive's clumsiness—Cederquist formed, "so to speak, three-dimensional two-dimensional objects."<sup>235</sup> Yet, *Olive's Chair* (1982; fig. 29) helps articulate how this

dimensional translation entered his furniture.<sup>236</sup> Danto also explained how Cederquist watched cartoons with his daughter and became enthralled with the way these two-dimensional cartoons rendered depth and perspective. He photographed stills from the screen, which he then later studied. As a result, he created *Olive's Chair* “promoti[ng] to reality...an item in the logically flat cartoon world of Popeye.”<sup>237</sup>

Like his other illusionistic furniture, Cederquist rendered *Olive's Chair* in fixed-point perspective, so that as you view the chair, one specific angle offers the “correct” view, or, the point in which the three-dimensional object looks like a normal three-dimensional object. A shift in perspective, however, reveals that the full object perceived by the mind does not reflect the actual, existing object (fig. 30). By inlaying flat pieces of birch plywood, Spanish cedar and highlighting areas with aniline dye, Cederquist created two-dimensional images of chair parts (e.g. a side and front view of a chair leg both rendered on a flat board) onto boards which he then actually constructed into a three-dimensional chair (albeit with impractical functionality).

As he worked on this idea further, Cederquist made other pieces of furniture, including a chest of drawers for the 1984 *Material Evidence* show at Workbench Gallery.<sup>238</sup> In *The Great Art Deco Furniture Explosion* (1984; fig. 31), Cederquist selected purple Colorcore and bird's-eye maple to create a two-dimensional representation of a chest of drawers escaping its joinery. The chest appears as if in a cartoon and an alarm clock had just gone off beneath it, rattling it to the core. Like with *Olive's Chair*, Cederquist employed perspective drawing and inlay on a flat surface to create the image. Yet, with *The Great Art Deco Furniture Explosion*, he made a functional chest. The lilac drawer fronts in this unstable-seeming construction serve as



actual drawer fronts. The trick, as there must be one, is that the drawers pull in a different angle to the facade than the furniture image suggests.<sup>239</sup>

With *Le Fleuron Manquant (The Missing Finial)* (1989; fig. 32), Cederquist continued the idea of making a piece of furniture look like a two-dimensional drawing resembling a three-dimensional object while in fact being a functional object in fully three dimensions.<sup>240</sup> Following the premise for the *New American Furniture* show, Cederquist took inspiration from a historical piece in the MFA collection. The self-trained, west coast furniture maker selected a classic piece made by one of the most renowned eighteenth-century American craftsmen: Rhode Island cabinet-maker John Townsend. In homage (or parody, as John Updike would suggest), Cederquist depicted the Townsend high chest of drawers on his own distorted high chest.<sup>241</sup>

In its direct quotation of a specific historical form, but to a new end, *The Missing Finial* exhibits the postmodern tendencies in art. The piece captures this era of thinking in addition to historical interest. Most profoundly, Cederquist used this piece as well as his other furniture to question our understanding of perception and reality in a world glutted with images. Cederquist also placed *The Missing Finial* in the context of a word that he borrowed from postmodern theory: deconstruction.<sup>242</sup>

At a literal level, Cederquist deconstructed Townsend's high chest when he created *The Missing Finial*. No eighteenth-century furniture lovers need be alarmed, however; he merely deconstructed its *image*. In an interview with the author, Cederquist recalled that after he made a chest of drawers resembling a stacked set of designer shipping crates, he wanted to deconstruct a highboy in a similar way.<sup>243</sup> In preparing for the *New American Furniture* show, he knew he wanted to use the Townsend creation,

thus it provided the opportunity. The resulting piece looks as though Cederquist dismantled Townsend's chest for shipment, put the pieces into packing crates, then stacked and situated them so as to reveal the contents of most of the boxes.

Cederquist depicted both front and side views on the façade of the chest of drawers. This created the illusion and offered space for him to display shipping crates as well as glimpses of the chest "beneath." Yet, unlike some of his earlier pieces with a flat façade, Cederquist used two planes to create the front of this chest. The illusion suggests the planes meet at a 90° angle, but they actually join at more of a 140° angle.

To create the illusion in *The Missing Finial* (and his other works), Cederquist first drew his design onto the plywood façade. Then, using his own veneers of mahogany, koa, and sitka spruce inlay, he created the visual puzzle on the two front planes and the plane covering (and creating) the third leg at the back left side of the piece. Cederquist then used epoxy resin inlay to fill the gaps between pieces and help illuminate the lines creating the image. Yet, by using wooden pieces to reference a wooden object, Cederquist deepened the illusion. Arthur Danto observed: "The wood that represents wood in *The Missing Finial* is, so to speak, self-representational, reality and simulation at once."<sup>244</sup> In places where the wood grain should be continuous, as in representing the carved shell in the skirt or the ball and claw feet, Cederquist used aniline dyes to outline the shapes rather than epoxy inlay. In this way he formed a consistent illusion and did not create any more small, intricate pieces than necessary.<sup>245</sup>

*The Missing Finial* represents a chaotic, disordered piece of furniture, yet it also serves as a chest of drawers. Unlike *The Great Art Deco Furniture Explosion*, the actual drawers do not lie precisely behind their image—nor could they, as Cederquist obscures

part of every visible, referenced drawer. *The Missing Finial* sports nine drawers in total, all of which open on metal runners at an angle (following the way the visual perspective suggests they would open). Two of the drawers require the drawer beneath to be opened before access is possible. Two other drawers employ trompe l'oeil latches to provide a handhold. For one, a small plank on the shipping-crate front pivots to allow access; for the other, a drawer "handle" tilts to offer a small handhold.

Although the boxes tend to reconstruct the chest as in the original, some of them twist and turn slightly or appear stacked with a gap between. While crates for the left and central finials face to the front, Cederquist turned the box for the rightmost finial to the side, offering only a glimpse inside. The interior appears dark and shadowy and it seems that, as suggested by the title, the finial is missing.

Cederquist explained two convergent reasons for the absent finial. The first relates to practicality. After choosing to orient the crate for the finial so that the contents would be barely visible, he knew it would involve a great deal of work to illustrate a finial in that small space, especially where so little of it would appear. Conveniently, Cederquist heard a tale of a Townsend chest that the MFA, Boston had loaned out, only to have it returned with a finial missing. By choosing to deliberately exclude the finial, he invoked an added layer of narrative into *The Missing Finial*.<sup>246</sup>

While the kind of visual deconstruction Cederquist employed in the chest invites attention for its unique execution and form, he cites historical precedence for earlier, slightly jumbled furniture. Cederquist loves graphic imagery, so it comes as little surprise that the referenced furniture did not exist in physical form. Rather, he refers to illustrations in Thomas Chippendale's *Gentleman and Cabinetmaker's Director*. To show

multiple possibilities for decoration on furniture like chairs (fig. 33) or chests (fig. 34), this eighteenth-century furniture maker's stylebook depicted an array of different options for customers all on one illustrated piece of furniture. The sectional aspect and collaged graphics intrigued Cederquist and he took up the process in reverse: to engage in deconstruction, then assemblage.

For Cederquist, "deconstruction" meant graphically dissecting an existing piece of furniture "into its constituent parts: legs, drawers, pediment, finials."<sup>247</sup> He recalled a general awareness of the term being popular in architecture, and a vague sense that it also related to literature. A well-informed reader of art magazines, he finds it intriguing how art—particularly art history and criticism—will adopt terms for its own use. As the popular term fit some of his constructions, he applied it to his furniture.<sup>248</sup>

While this physical interpretation of the word may not seem entirely related to French theorist Jacques Derrida's idea of Deconstruction, the two will bear some comparison. For Derrida, Deconstruction offered a method to examine certain established ways of thinking and take apart the assumptions that underlie it, as well as the kind of privileges and power dynamics that said ways of thinking create. At a quite elementary level, he advocated looking at old ideas in new ways.<sup>249</sup> Yet, he also did this with language itself, "writing 'sous rature,'" or "under erasure," as Gayatri Spivak wrote in the preface of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (which Spivak translated for 1976 publication in English). As Spivak indicated, this means to "write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion (since the word is inaccurate [sic], it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)"<sup>250</sup> The way Cederquist asks us to question our perception—how we interpret meaning from visual cues—does not differ much from