how Derrida asked us to question linguistic meaning. As Cederquist toyed with perception in his work, he joined other colleagues in the second generation of studio furniture makers in questioning the very idea of what furniture was or needed to be.\footnote{251}

For Cederquist, his visual illusions relate to his interest in how we tend to confuse image and object. After he developed this interest and began making artwork that addressed the interplay, like \textit{Le Fleuron Manquant (The Missing Finial)}, Cederquist encountered the work of René Magritte. The Belgian painter also used artwork to invite viewers to question the way they perceive images and objects. One famous painting even addressed this with its title: \textit{The Treachery of Images (This is Not a Pipe)}. Beneath this painting of a pipe, Magritte scripted the words “Leci n’est pas une pipe,” or, “This is not a pipe,” to encourage viewers to contemplate the inconsistency and discover, in fact, the statement is true. Cederquist, however, found it unnecessary to issue such a “disclaimer” with his work. Engaging with his illusionary objects in physical space, he observed, achieves the same as Magritte’s contradictory statement. Thus, in reference to the Belgian painter and his oeuvre, Cederquist chose to lead with the French translation for \textit{The Missing Finial}.\footnote{252}

The way that \textit{The Missing Finial} and other pieces by Cederquist question our perception and relationship with reality relates to questions and concerns posed by various postmodern theorists and critics. In 1967, Guy Debord wrote \textit{La Société du Spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle)}, outlining numerous ways in which current society entirely preoccupied itself with spectacle and images, such that “the spectacle is [even] the chief-product of present-day society.”\footnote{253} In 1981, the same year John Cederquist produced his first illusionistic furniture, Jean Baudrillard wrote \textit{Simulacres et
Simulation (Simulacra and Simulation) in which he expressed concern about the
“precession of simulacra” and a society that substitutes the hyperreal for the real, or the
hyperreal for that which never existed. Baudrillard posited that hyperreal, fantastic
places like Disneyland are “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the
rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer
real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.”

Later, in 1997, Ada Louise Huxtable continued a similar critique in The Unreal
America: Architecture and Illusion. Her concerns related specifically to buildings, to an
architecture coming from or pandering to “the American state of mind in which illusion is
preferred over reality to the point where the replica is accepted as genuine and the
simulacrum replaces the source.” Part of her concern lay in the approach to history that
she observed in places like Colonial Williamsburg or Disneyland—places where history
is presented as a concept, a commodity, and any actual history has been stripped away for
easy digestion.

These theorists and critics responded to their perception of a society glutted with
images, no longer able to easily distinguish the real from the simulacrum. The art world
responded to the same concern. The catalog for John Cederquist: Deceptions (a one-man
show at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in 1983) noted Cederquist’s concern “about our
society becoming increasingly information and service oriented, with ever greater
dependency on two-dimensional media.” More importantly, his concern lay with the
problem of television as it “gives the greatest impression of realism, but each bit of
information is subject to myriad levels of editing.” But Cederquist was not alone in his
concerns.
In 1977, Yale University Art Gallery mounted the exhibit *The Eye of the Beholder: Fakes, Replicas and Alterations in American Art*, tapping into this cultural anxiety about authenticity versus simulacra. The exhibition included fine and decorative arts objects and preoccupied itself with “mak[ing] the visitor focus on individual American Art objects in order to develop an eye for the genuine.” In the introduction to the catalog, Alan Shestack stated: “In our era printed pictures and all kinds of imitations have become omnipresent. Cheap and inaccurate reproductions and tawdry objects intrude into our daily lives.” In response, the exhibition called for careful connoisseurship to resist the devilish insurgence of simulacra.\(^{259}\)

Nine years later, in 1986, the main art gallery at California State University, Fullerton showed *The Medium is the Illusion*. This exhibit included not only painting and sculpture in the realistic or trompe l’oeil vein, but also the illusionistic work of clay artists Marilyn Levine and Richard Shaw. Levine and Shaw both employed clay’s ability to mimic other materials—like leather in Levine’s work—to make highly realistic creations. In the introduction to Mark Del Veccio’s *Post-Modern Ceramics*, Garth Clark recalled calling ceramic works by artists like Shaw “Super-Objects” beginning in the late 1970s. “Super-Objects” were to craft what photorealism was in painting. Both involved meticulous skill and attention while addressing notions of representation in general. Although this California show did not include the work of John Cederquist, two years later, in 1988, the Muckenthaler Cultural Center, also in Fullerton, displayed his work in another similarly themed show: “Trompe L’Oeil: The Magic of Deception.”\(^{260}\)

While Cederquist’s work represents a unique version of trompe l’oeil, other craft furniture makers also created trompe l’oeil works. In the late 1970s, Wendell Castle made
a small series of trompe l’oeil furniture sculptures (as discussed in Chapter Three), culminating in his 1985 *Ghost Clock* (fig. 17). At first glance, the piece looks like an average, Federal style grandfather clock draped in a white sheet. Yet, Castle and his assistants made the clock entirely from wood. They stack-laminated boards, carved the clock and its drape, and then bleached all natural wood colors out of the “sheet.” The skillful execution truly fools the eye.²⁶¹

In the same year that Castle made *Ghost Clock*, fellow illusionist Silas Kopf wrote an article “Perspective in Marquetry” for *Fine Woodworking*. His article discussed a visit he had made to Italy to see Renaissance intarsia first hand. In addition to providing historical context of techniques, contents and masters, Kopf also offered basic rules of perspective for any woodworkers also interested in creating three-dimensional illusions on a two-dimensional surface. Kopf noted how the trip affected his own work. Whereas previously he mostly created floral patterns, he noted, “now I am attempting three-dimensional illusions on furniture. Some subjects are humorous, some symbolic.” As an example of this new direction, the magazine illustrated a cabinet that appeared to have open doors with a cat curled upon the interior shelf. Kopf created the “open” doors and cat using marquetry techniques. Kopf, like other second-generation makers, took a light-hearted approach to furniture design, enjoying the possibilities for trompe l’oeil illusions.²⁶²

In the catalog for California State University Fullerton’s *The Medium Is the Illusion*, curators Karin Schnell and Joseph Silvestri observed that the kind of illusion their exhibit celebrated would not have been permissible under modernism. Modernist doctrine’s adherence to formalism meant that painted sculpture or three-dimensional
paintings were *verboten*. Representing one object or material in a different medium was just the kind of thing modernists despised about Victorian productions. When postmodern artists and craftspersons like Cederquist, Castle or Kopf returned to such representation, they did so in full awareness of the past, deliberately employing illusion.

In this way, Cederquist’s work additionally engaged in the postmodern rejection of modernism, both in general and in craft. This “Post-Modernist reaction,” wrote Arthur Danto, “made it acceptable for paintings,” or in this case, furniture, “to be again representational.” In the catalog *The Art of John Cederquist*, Danto suggested that Cederquist seemed to borrow perspective from painting’s discard pile, as tossed aside during modernism. In doing so, Cederquist also “use[d] craft to mock craft, opposing in the true spirit of postmodernism the commitment to a purity of joinery and veneer.” When illustrating a dovetail with epoxy or a line drawing with aniline dye, Cederquist effectively laughs at the heavy focus on immaculate joinery and proper construction. The rejection is deliberate; a piece written about his method and the way he creates “dovetails” quoted Cederquist to jest: “I can make those dovetails in minutes, whereas those guys back East work for hours trying to do the same thing.” After Garry Knox Bennett pounded a nail into a cabinet to show what he thought about excessive joinery, Cederquist simply alluded to it in work like *The Missing Finial*, not needing to make an outright statement; it had already been done.

While Cederquist engaged with postmodern ideas in the very nature of his work—rejecting modernism, employing representation and illusion, deliberately addressing history as he crafted a narrative, and highlighting concerns about a society glutted with images and hyperreality by questioning our perception—curator Suzanne Ramljak
suggested that crafts can themselves be a response to our “era of hyperreality.” In the catalogue for a 2002 exhibit *Crafting a Legacy: Contemporary American Crafts in the Philadelphia Museum of Art,* she argued that the individual, handmade nature of craft objects allow them to “function as a hindrance to this [present day] suction into hyperreality.” That in fact crafts offer a kind of political resistance to postmodernity.  

This poses an interesting question: can craft simultaneously be postmodern and reject the postmodern world?

While crafts as appreciated, physical objects can aid “us in a program of re-embodiment” in response to the “growing intangibility of everyday life,” Ramljak’s romantic idealization of the crafts seems to deny that they were created in a postmodern world.  

Such crafts necessarily were influenced by the world and are part of it, even if they also offered a response to it. As Umberto Eco argued, “the past…cannot really be destroyed;” we cannot deny that the image of craft as savior from postmodernity is a false construction.  

Creative furniture in the 1970s and 1980s was able to be a humorous, communicative art form precisely because handmade furniture was no longer a necessity.

Before Cederquist built *The Missing Finial,* he had already taken interest in the idea of translating an image of an historic chest of drawers into an actual chest of drawers. In an undated letter to Judy Coady, co-director of the Workbench Gallery, Cederquist discussed a proposed project for an upcoming show at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. He had “found a highboy that [he was] working with” and the concept would relate to “furniture as an image rather than an object.” Some of the drawers would function; others would not. He would illustrate the front and side of the highboy “using the slight angle in conjunction with the forced perspective to abstract the piece and give it
a strong cartoon quality.” Directly behind this letter, the Workbench archives contains photocopies of drawings depicting a 1740 Connecticut highboy owned by the Art Institute of Chicago. Cederquist also provided the gallery with various photocopies from a 1904 Thonet catalog, referenced in the letter, that illustrate some furniture upon which Cederquist based earlier works.\textsuperscript{272} For example, a “toilettetisch Nr. 150” became \textit{Jungle Dresser} (1982; figs. 35 and 36). In translating the objects, like \textit{Jungle Dresser} or \textit{Game Table} (1982) he created the furniture using the particular perspective in the image, the “forced perspective” or “fixed-point perspective” discussed above. As various exhibition catalogs have noted, in doing this, Cederquist “call[s] the very idea of a ‘correct’ viewpoint into question.”\textsuperscript{273}

Because he works from an image limited to only two dimensions, when he adds the third there is still only one point of view from which the illusion fully “works.” Precisely because a piece of his furniture, like \textit{The Missing Finial}, is a three-dimensional object, the viewer encounters it from many more angles. As a result she sees a “distorted” image from most of them. The catalog to \textit{John Cederquist: Deceptions} notes: “There is some irony in the realization that these are not really \textit{incorrect} views, they are simply \textit{other} views that give each piece a sense of tenuosity that propels the viewer around the piece to stability, or that catch one up in the abstracted composition.”\textsuperscript{274}

Ultimately, this works towards Derrida’s idea of Deconstruction—offering the possibility that a different perspective may appear wrong but in fact is just as real and valid as the one that seems “normal.” In the skewed perspective and toying with dimensionality, Cederquist engages with a question that also occupied postmodern theorists, asking, “what is real?”\textsuperscript{275} By addressing how humans perceive form,
Cederquist’s furniture points to “the vulnerability of our senses.” When viewed from the “wrong” perspective, the visual images do not match with what our brains expect. The furniture forces us, at a physical level, to question what we “know” to be true. If we take it a step beyond the furniture in front of us, we realize the unreliability of our perceptions and how our individual viewpoint (literal or metaphorical) offers merely one out of many equally valid perspectives—a truly postmodern way of viewing Truth and reality.

In fact, when viewers first encountered *The Missing Finial* and the way it questioned the validity of their perceptions, “it freaked people out”—an end Cederquist had hoped for. Over 130,000 people encountered the piece while on display at the MFA. (The show then traveled to Washington, DC; Cincinnati, OH; and Oakland, CA.) In promoting the *New American Furniture* show, the MFA used *The Missing Finial* as the image to help sell the exhibition. The *New York Times* depicted it in the blurb they ran about the show. A detailed view of the cabinet graced the cover of the gallery map for the exhibition at the MFA, showing only dismantled bits of a chest of drawers within cubist-like crates. *The Missing Finial* offered a good graphic choice; it was already a two-dimensional image, so would not lose as much when flattened in a printed photograph. Of course, the illusion provided by its three dimensions does not transfer so easily. Yet, for an art museum branching out by showing contemporary furniture art, this flat, close-up image may have provided just the necessary transition to entice visitors to see the show.

*The Missing Finial*, according to Garry Knox Bennett, was the “star of the show.” Kenneth Baker referred to it as “the most remarkable object” in the exhibit. Gracing the
printed publicity and confounding visitors, the chest of drawers indeed made an impact. With the other compelling works in the *New American Furniture* show, the cabinet helps mark a high point in studio furniture. In addition to receiving press in papers like *The New York Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The San Francisco Chronicle, Southern Accents* and *Art & Antiques* both ran articles about the show in early 1990. In July of the same year, Constance Stapleton wrote “The New Art Furniture” for *Sculpture* magazine, building off the exhibition and discussing many of the included artists. With the assistance of *New American Furniture* and such publicity, these immaculately made pieces showed the art world that, for anyone still doubting, furniture could be art.²⁸²

Many clever, communicative works in the show also mark a full realization of how makers engaged with postmodern ideas. In *The Missing Finial*, Cederquist rejected the first-generation’s modernist interest in honest construction and functionality, instead preferring to create furniture with art-like content with function of secondary importance. Cederquist engaged in representation while crafting a narrative that quoted the past. Ultimately, the content and form of *The Missing Finial* critiques postmodern society’s captivation with images, an enchantment that created a world of questionable authenticity. While postmodern theorists and cultural critics used words to express their fears and concerns about a society fed with hyperreal images, Cederquist asked people to engage with these theoretical ideas with their physical being. He asked viewers to understand the validity of multiple perspectives when his furniture forced them to experience many distorted perspectives in a situation in which they “should not” have been distorted (three-dimensional furniture should appear as it is, as three-dimensional furniture). Regardless of whether or not John Cederquist conceived of his work as
postmodern, *The Missing Finial* epitomizes the ways in which postmodern ideas shaped and shifted the field of studio furniture from the late 1970s to its creation and debut in 1989.
Conclusion

*New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers*

increased public awareness of artistic craft furniture. Tom Loeser observed that following this well-received show at the MFA, the Peter T. Joseph Gallery in New York provided a similar, enhancing effect for the field and his career. Businessman Peter Joseph built off the success and interest in *New American Furniture* when he opened his eponymous gallery for studio furniture in 1991. In fact, many of the people he represented had participated in the 1989 exhibition.\[^{283}\]

To best encourage the creativity and expression possible in craft furniture, Joseph chose to offer these select makers a stipend with which to build furniture. For each show, he published well-designed catalogs with commissioned essays. In turn, Joseph sold their work at his gallery—for higher prices than most artists had seen.\[^{284}\]

Maker Ed Zucca compared the gallery to the Emerald City; there were great shows, clients were buying. But, when Joseph became ill, closed the gallery in 1997 and died the following year, “the goose that laid the golden egg was gone.”\[^{285}\] The gallery marked a period of recognition and economic success in studio furniture, though was not without complications.\[^{286}\] In *The Maker’s Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940-1990*, Cooke et al. observed that the prominent role galleries played for studio furniture in the 1990s came after “federal and state funding for…‘academic’ exhibitions [at museums and universities] began to dry up in the eighties.” With this and fewer regional shows, it became harder for newer makers to reach a similar level of prominence.\[^{287}\] The field changed.
In the 1990s, makers continued to engage with postmodern ideas in their furniture, but it lost some of its heft. Bennett launched his rebellion against “technoweenies” at the end of the 1970s; by the 1990s, the postmodern rejection of modernism had made its case. Makers continued to create art furniture that communicated ideas and narratives and drew on history and popular culture. Some also continued to use their work to address social or political concerns. Furniture remained a playful art form, particularly while Peter Joseph helped fund some craftspersons’ work.

During the 1980s, studio furniture makers had just begun to discover how they could expand the field, practicing their newfound language. The works explored above offer early forays into using craft furniture to communicate ideas other than function and beauty and even tell jokes. The wit and conversation of these works are part of what makes them so delightful.

Wit and Conversation

In a 1985 artist statement, Garry Knox Bennett explored the relationship between his furniture and jokes. “To understand my art,” he wrote, “a viewer has to understand jokes.” Jokes build piece by piece, an “accumulation of illogical data that flip-flops logic until the unexpected is understood with joyful rush of logic and justice.” Bennett described this process of understanding as a “creative experience.” “This,” he wrote, “is what I try to do with my furniture.” He compared his three-dimensional objects to the story line of a joke and “the little details, the accents, the harelimps, the lisps” he adds are “the quirks and highlights of the jokes.” With all these details woven together, he hoped that when a viewer encountered his furniture, he would just “’get it’.” A good joke—like,