laundering required once a child is fed. The chair's juxtaposition makes complete sense but the tension in it still offers humor.

Ryerson saw the communicative properties of familiar found objects and employed them in the *Washboard Children's Highchair* and a subsequent series of *Washboard Children's Rockers* (fig. 15). The small chairs share clothespin spindles, cardboard detergent boxes and the washboard back with the highchair. In a beautiful adaptation of form, Ryerson turned the chair legs to look like giant clothespins, even cutting a slit so that the legs slide over and "pin" the blue rockers in place. Ryerson observed that the shoulder of the clothespin-as-leg looks like a cabriole leg, making a subtle nod to furniture history.[148]

The rocker forms, however, relate less to the feeding and laundry cycle than does the *Highchair*. As an evolution from the highchair, the delightful *Rockers* still tell about the never-ending laundry of parenthood and its frustrations. They lack, however, the tension and juxtaposition of the *Highchair* as a place wherein clothes get soiled and children refueled for more mess-making.

Mid-century craft furniture makers, like modernist architects, took little to no interest in communicating these kinds of stories with their furniture.[149] Tommy Simpson gained recognition for narrative work in the late 1960s with the *Fantasy Furniture* exhibition while teacher Dan Jackson developed sculpturally narrative pieces.[150] Other well-known makers in the field, however, generally relied on creating visually appealing, functional wooden forms. Any story in their furniture would discuss only the wood and the purpose of the piece, as in George Nakashima's work (fig. 16), or its sculptural beauty, as in Wendell Castle's (fig. 7) or Jon Brooks' pieces of the time.

This began to change in the 1970s as more furniture makers started to engage with narrative or conceptual content in their work. In part, this related to the increasing professionalization and education. In a 1984 review of two California furniture shows, Lewis Buchner acknowledged to the *Fine Woodworking* audience: "We cannot avoid the impact that the college-level woodworking programs are having on our field." While there were many self-taught makers, Buchner observed that those coming from the undergraduate and graduate programs had "been taught to probe for understanding and meaning in their work, no matter how obtuse their ideas may seem to others." Indeed, the university programs encouraged careful thought and consideration. Mitch Ryerson and Tom Loeser both recalled that what mattered at Boston University's Program in Artisanry under Alphonse Mattia and Jere Osgood was that the piece worked as a whole, even if Ryerson found some critiques tiresome when they focused too closely on technical decisions like what size roundover bit would have made the piece more successful.[151]

Not everyone appreciated the infusion of content-based work in the furniture field. The *Material Evidence: New Color Techniques in Handmade Furniture* catalog acknowledged that "suspicio[n]s" existed about "the current emphasis on ideas and images drawn beyond the experience of wood and the workshop."[152] Yet, with instructors like Alphonse Mattia teaching students that furntiure could have interesting content, new opportunities for communication became possible and encouraged.

This turn to concept and narrative, for many second-generation makers, did not come at the expense of craftsmanship. Maker Rosanne Somerson observed that "the pieces that work the best combine concept with a high level of craftsmanship."[153] Indeed, for many of the second generation the craftsmanship and technique "serv[e] concept," as

the 1985 *Material Evidence* catalog noted.[154] With the increased skill and proficiency gained from training programs, second-generation makers enhanced their ability to clearly articulate their message.

In her book *The Creative Habit*, a book about the creative process, choreographer Twyla Tharp acknowledged the relationship between skill and execution. "Skill," she wrote, "is how you close the gap between what you can see in your mind's eye and what you can produce; the more skill you have, the more sophisticated and accomplished your ideas can be."[155] From a woodworking perspective, in 1989 Verne Stanford of Penland School of Crafts articulated in a letter to *Fine Woodworking* that "having a repertoire of techniques in wood is what allows one to 'say' what one wants."[156] Clearly, Stanford acknowledged the desire to communicate ideas through skilful woodworking. With the technical knowledge from institutional programs, makers in the second generation had the requisite skill to execute their conceptions.

The first-generation makers too had skill; however, for many of them it was gained over years of self-instruction. Sam Maloof, Art Carpenter, Wharton Esherick and George Nakashima all refined their furniture-making on their own, without benefit of formal woodworking education.[157] Yet, these makers generally created functional, beautiful pieces that did not explore additional possibilities for narrative. It would seem, however, that the increase in teaching positions and formalized education in the 1970s created opportunity and encouragement for more art-like considerations in terms of content. The increase in dedicated galleries with educated clientele in the 1980s may have also helped make narrative furniture possible by expanding the economic opportunities and client base. Warren Johnson, for example, recalled that when he and his

wife Bebe began Pritam & Eames gallery, they felt their mission was to educate people to recognize the diversity of the studio furniture field.[158]

The turn to narrative and conceptual content that happened in studio furniture—and other crafts like ceramics and jewelry before it—was in part a move to be more art-like. As postmodernism opened the boundaries of art to include earthworks and performances or happenings and more, craft also tried to work its way into the expanded arena.[159] The resultant "is it art or is it craft?" debate has continued unsettled ever since it first began in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[160] In the introduction to Julie Hall's 1977 book *Tradition and Change: The New American Craftsman*, Rose Slivka discussed these blurred lines of craft and art. "Modern craft," she wrote, had picked up fine art's "concerns with ideas, energy, irony, mystery."[161] Craft started communicating content beyond functionality, beauty and process.

Craft as a whole continues to debate the issue because, at its heart, craft is a functional pursuit.[162] By remaining dedicated to function, first-generation makers held fast to that aspect of modernist ideology. Interestingly, as makers began to slide away from pure function, craft critics and writers worked linguistically to redefine 'function' in relation to furniture so that the word included the purpose of communication—formerly the only "function" of art.

In 1972, function in furniture meant structural use. The catalog to the inaugural Renwick Gallery show, *Woodenworks: Elevating the Everyday*, quoted Art Carpenter stating: "I don't think there's any need for the crafts to pretend that they are doing more than making beautiful things for function. There's no need for us to make a chair you can't sit in." Wendell Castle began to stretch the notion of function in the same catalog

when he linguistically assumed that beauty is a purpose for crafts as well. He stated that he hopes his furniture "performs some useful function in addition to, I hope, being beautiful." Still, function here means that he tried to create a sculptural space in which one could sit or a table that offered a horizontal surface.

At the same time, architecture began to take an interest in semiology—the study of signs and symbols and the interpretation thereof—which involved similar concerns.[163] In 1973, Umberto Eco wrote "Function and Sign: Semiotics in Architecture" in which he observed that architectural objects generally "do not *communicate* (and are not designed to communicate), but *function*."[164] He asked then what role semiotics and use of signs can play in architecture: "One of the first questions for semiotics to face, then…is whether it is possible to interpret functions as having something to do with communication." By taking a "semiotic point of view," one can see functions differently and "define them better, precisely as functions, and thereby to discover other types of functionality, which are just as essential but which a straight functional interpretation keeps one from perceiving." In the essay, Eco continued to discuss how architecture is a "system of signs," a language that must be learned.

By the 1980s, studio furniture joined this conversation and repurposing of "function" to include communicating ideas. In 1981, the New Gallery of Contemporary Art in Cleveland, OH hosted a show *Handcrafted Wood Furniture: Furniture as Sculpture by Five Contemporary Artists.* Furniture makers Blaise Gaston, Jim Remington, Judy Kinsley McKie, John McNaughton and Tom Luckey participated. Acknowledging some sculptors' choices to use furniture forms as a basis for their artwork (*e.g.* Scott Burton and Lucas Samaras), this show turned the other direction to

view mainstream furniture as art, a furniture in which "traditional methods of woodworking are integrated with traditional ideas of function." Yet, wrote Geraldine Wojno Kiefer in the introductory essay, "function, here primarily interpreted as use, is *expanded* to signify and communicate emotion, humor, and sense of historical continuity, and a love for the chosen material, wood" (emphasis mine). This semantic shift undoubtedly helped the art museum bring craft furniture within its walls. Some might argue that furniture makers turned to art-like expression of ideas for this very reason: acceptance as artists and ability to draw art prices.[165]

In 1986, Edward Lucie-Smith and Michael Stone both wrote about Wendell Castle and further contributed to redefining "function" in the field of furniture. Lucie-Smith reviewed Castle's show of thirteen clocks at the Alexander Milliken Gallery. In the article, Lucie-Smith observed: "If these objects 'function,' the way they do is indistinguishable from the functioning of fine art."[166] Michael Stone, in *Contemporary American Woodworkers*, noted that Castle's recent work expressed his "philosophy that furniture can transcend its utilitarian role and communicate a message."[167]

Throughout his career, Wendell Castle has pushed furniture toward the sculptural, expanding the meaning of function in furniture. In a review of his work in 1989, *Furniture by Wendell Castle,* Davira Taragin and Edward Cooke, Jr. write that, in Castle's work, "function is treated in a more cerebral fashion as the functional form becomes a metaphor for larger artistic issues."[168] Even in the 1960s, Castle physically stretched furniture's relationship with function (see the sculptural *Wall Table No. 16*, 1969, in fig. 7 for an example) but it was his clock series in the mid 1980s and the written critiques of his work in that decade that sought to include concept under the realm of

"function" in craft furniture. Of the clock series, only his trompe l'oeil *Ghost Clock*—appearing as a grandfather clock covered in a sheet, though made entirely of wood (fig. 17)—did not tell the time. Yet it skillfully and humorously communicated an idea.

By subtly changing the definition of function in the crafts to include the communication of ideas, including narrative and social or political commentary, critics did two things. First, they laid a clear bridge for craft to walk over to enter the world of art as craft makers heeded function less while retaining the materials or techniques traditional to craft. Wendell Castle's pieces epitomize this in furniture as he made room for later makers to focus on content over function.

Redefining function also kept these items made from wood (or clay, or metal, etc.) squarely under the craft umbrella as a guard against anyone who might be tempted to dismiss them as art wannabes and not true "craft." Art Carpenter, for one, expressed his wariness of furniture not rooted in function in his 1983 "The Rise of Artiture" for *Fine Woodworking*.[169] Redefining function could subtly try to assuage such doubts. It pandered to the modernists who still adhered to functionalist ideas. Yet, the infusion of art-like content and the intention to express ideas as the overriding function came truly out of postmodernism and no linguistic legerdemain can disguise this.

When Mitch Ryerson took a class at PIA called Urban Archeology, he found that some postmodern ideas matched his own perspective. In the course, the students read Robert Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972).[170] Ryerson appreciated the way Venturi valued the vernacular. What resonated for him from his understanding of postmodernism in relation to architecture was that postmodernism "wasn't an effete art form."[171] Much postmodern architecture never appealed to Ryerson—"it seemed

cartoonish…too self-conscious"—but he thinks "the earlier roots of it were interesting." For example, he found Philip Johnson's AT&T building in New York City (shaped like a Chippendale chest of drawers) intriguing as it reacted "against the impersonal" feel of the International Style by becoming more narrative—and communicative, as Charles Jencks would argue.

Postmodern architecture continued to fulfill functional requirements as it became more narrative. Mitch Ryerson's *Washboard Children's Highchair* and *Rockers* demonstrate how studio furniture makers privileged content and narrative without dismissing function or skillful production. Even after Italian designers like Ettore Sottsass and the Memphis group "exploded the envelope," making room for new options in color, material, form and decoration in furniture design, craft furniture makers remained committed to craftsmanship and durability.

Although to Ryerson handmade furniture is already a personal statement—one that values the hand and time of the maker and the intention to be loved and appreciated by the end user—he also chose to incorporate the narrative element into his work. Using found objects excited Ryerson precisely because of their familiarity and all that conveyed, but also because he could use the familiar elements (like washboards and clothespins) to connect with his audience. For example, people might see the washboards and "that would draw them in," but his treatment of them and the context "would make [the viewer] experience them in a new way." The way he repurposed objects to delight and interest his audience is very similar to the way postmodern architects created buildings to be familiar and inviting. Austrian architect Hans Hollein, for example, designed the *Austrian Travel Agency* (1976-1978) in Vienna to include indoor metal palm

trees, ruined fluted columns and a pointed dome as familiar symbols for foreign travel locations (fig. 18).[172]

However, Ryerson acknowledged that there is a thin line to walk between making interesting, successful work and pieces that might be "cute or trite." In a 2010 interview with the author, he stated he is now less interested in doing narrative pieces because it "is too easy, almost," that telling a story can even be "a crutch." Jokes or puns could become "tiresome very quickly." To make a piece successful, the overall design must be most important, Ryerson said. While he found some clever furniture in the past to have the potential to be irritating, "what distinguished some of those [more successful makers] was that they were really serious about the design and thinking of the whole thing as part of a tradition" while being "proud of being furniture makers" and taking it all seriously.[173]

Ryerson's *Washboard Children's Highchair* successfully worked as an aesthetic piece and an interesting narrative work. The layered meanings gained from the combination of materials and form offer a wittiness that lasts beyond the first glance. The careful attention to detail and craftsmanship offer additional gravitas to anchor and support the fun and silliness. When contemplating the difference between pure sculpture and artistic, craft furniture, Ryerson observed that for him, making specifically functional furniture forms does not feel like a limitation, but rather an opportunity. Furniture "gives you the kind of definition that makes [the work] understandable," offering a "kind of communication that has maybe a broader appeal." People understand furniture because they engage with its forms everyday. Like a sonnet provides infinite opportunities for expression within the parameter of fourteen lines, furniture offers great opportunity for

expression with the gentle guidelines of known furniture forms. By stretching within those broad boundaries, the furniture maker can take comfort from its limits while having vast tools and opportunity to communicate.

Social and Political Content in Furniture

Although Mitch Ryerson prefers to make beautiful, encouraging work, some makers in the late 1970s and 1980s carefully crafted furniture with a social or political agenda.[174] Maker Ed Zucca, whom Mitch Ryerson noted to be one of the makers that very successfully makes social commentary, acknowledged that furniture is not well suited to such commentary, though he employs it anyway.[175] Because of the scale and ultimate use of the pieces, it is hard to be confrontational as a furniture maker.

Zucca's piece for the 1989 *New American Furniture* show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston exemplifies the kind of social commentary possible in furniture. Constance Stapleton's write up for the show in *Sculpture* magazine begins with an illustration of Zucca's *Mystery Robots Rip Off The Rainforest* (fig. 19). Under this trestle table, Zucca carved four robot figures (resembling Lego- and Playmobil-type figures), two of which form the supportive base for the table and between them carry an 11-foot plank of Honduras mahogany. The title and form convey a statement to fellow woodworkers about the dangers of deforestation, encouraging awareness; the irony lies in Zucca's participation in that which he opposes.

A decade earlier, Steve Madsen also expressed environmental concerns in a piece called *Factories in the Fields Where the Rivers Used to Flow*. *Craft Horizons with Craft World* published an illustration of this small chest of drawers in August of 1978 (fig.

20).[176] The stacked shape resembles a factory, an image enhanced by three smokestacks and secured with layered, white smoke "emissions." Madsen used Plexiglas to create ornamental additions that simulate pipes while suggesting American art deco furniture. Interestingly, in a subtle touch, Madsen chose to use spalted maple for the drawer fronts. The thick, black figuring (resulting from fungal activity) waves about along the horizontal grain, cleverly suggesting pollution.

Paul Sasso, however, addressed gender and religion in the table he designed for the 1989 *New American Furniture* show. John Updike described this highly sculptural, decorated piece in *Art & Antiques*:

> Paul Sasso's pink version of a nineteenth-century worktable is decorated with vaginal forms, a skirt carved to mimic the limp fall of cloth, and a mural inside the lid showing God as a patriarch wounded by scissors. The effect is gaudy and a touch religio-political, as is the pieces' title, *No, You Get Out of My Garden.*[177]

The table itself, though modeled on a c. 1820 game and worktable, nods to female genitalia in form in addition to decoration. In the catalog for the show, Edward Cooke, Jr. noted that Sasso pierced the "finger of God" in "rejection of this sexist patriarchal system" in which males control females. Part of what adds to the gender commentary is again the nature of the furniture form—that he modeled it on a nineteenth-century worktable that primarily women would have used.[178]

Historical elements, and references to forms, offer some of the most effective tools for communicative or narrative content in furniture, as we will explore in the next chapter. Mitch Ryerson laughed at the idea of "original work" devoid of influences. "If you were totally original and had no influences," he said, "nobody would know what the hell you were doing. It would be completely incomprehensible. For something to be

comprehensible," he added, "it has to have a language and the language has to be something that people speak, to some degree, and so it has been done before." Indeed, by drawing on familiar elements and a story of parenthood that others could certainly relate to, Ryerson's *Washboard Children's Highchair* spoke a language that others speak or could easily decode to arrive at his tale. Each element carried meaning, offering different pieces to create a full narrative in one functional piece of furniture.

Ryerson used familiar, found objects as his shared language. As we will see in the next chapter, furniture makers often referenced history to communicate their messages. Once it was again acceptable to engage it, the shared knowledge base of history offered ample opportunity to quickly construct meaningful content in all the arts.