

The Rise of Artiture

Woodworking comes of age

by Arthur Espenet Carpenter

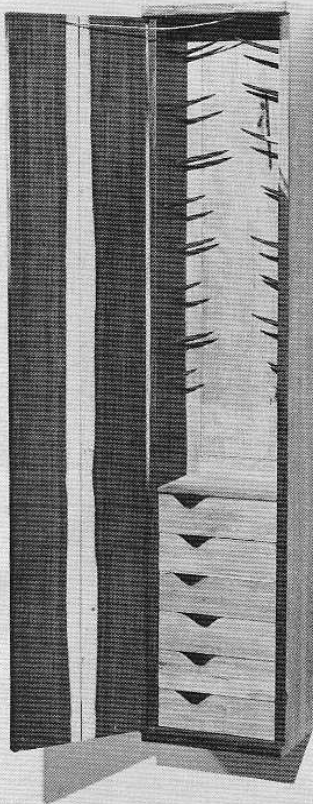
Last summer I was invited east to view a number of woodworking shows, so that I might offer in this magazine some reflections on the state of the craft. After a full week devoted to touring various galleries, museum exhibits and the perennial great fair at Rhinebeck, I have concluded that woodworking has come of age. Thirty years ago wood was not part of the sophisticated craft scene. It was rarely included even in craft fairs, much less in museum and gallery exhibits, and then only in the form of small objects. Wood was out-classed by the aristocracy of clay, textiles and metals. I recall the hesitant acceptance that was given me in the mid-1950s, particularly by potters, when I became a member of a Bay Area cross-media craft group. It was only ten years ago that furniture and treen began to bloom and that wood came to take its place unabashed in the craft world. Now wood in furniture form is even being made into sometimes metaphoric objects of non-utility, metaphor being the usual sphere of the painter and the sculptor. The ceramicists were among the first from the craft world to invade that lofty territory.

Ceramicists of thirty years ago made pots to use, and worried over the lip of a cup. Today prestige accrues to those who make artifacts that, though made of clay, cannot be used as pots. Some woodworkers seem to be going in the same direction, that is, toward fame by investigating material and form to the exclusion of function.

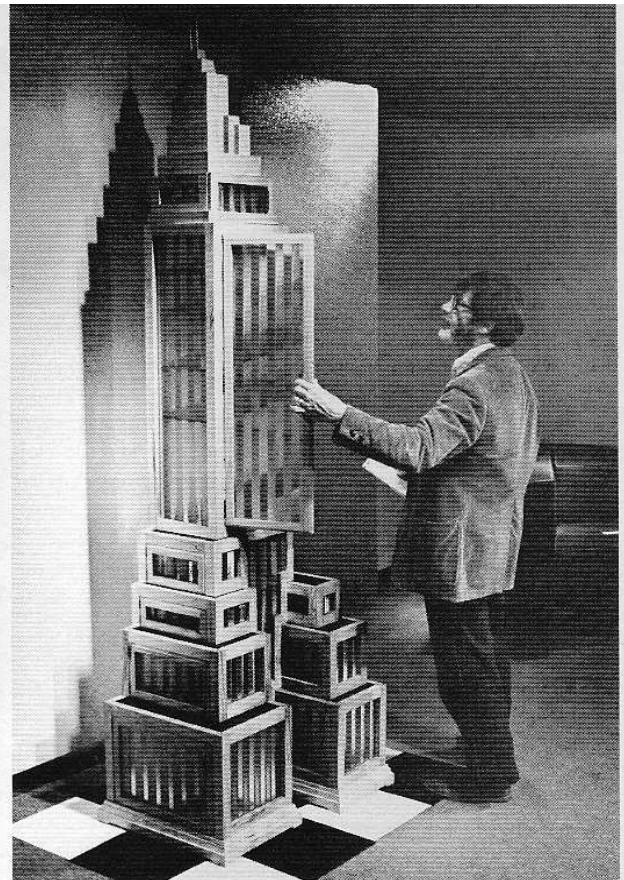
My daughter Victoria calls this work "artiture," artifacts that have the traditional form

of furniture, but are not of any practical use. I am not sure what the impulse is for making much of the artiture I saw, whether it is for play, pun, farce, or a quick ego fix. But to cut a chair in half, paint it striped, and hang it on a wall draws much more attention, brings ten times the money, and is much easier than making a chair that works, and that sings with the care of its maker.

The titles alone of the shows I saw are telling: "Young Talent—New Directions" headlined the display at Workbench Gallery in Manhattan, the work of five



'Krenovian' jewelry cabinet in rosewood and persimmon by Rob Sperber.



Notebook in hand, Art Carpenter sizes up Bill Crozier's 'Skyscraper' at New York's Workbench Gallery.

new graduates of various woodworking schools. "Furniture-making: The Design Approach" named an eclectic assortment at the Pritam and Eames Gallery in Easthampton, Long Island. And coming and going through the San Francisco airport I was treated to "Artists' Furniture" on view in the North Terminal Connector Gallery.

Fully a third of the work I saw exhibited as furniture was really artiture, so I had ample opportunity to deal with my initial reaction to this stuff, which was distrust. I also saw many handsome pieces that genuinely could be called furniture or treen, so some people are still minding the store. At Pritam and Eames, Hank Gilpin's maple writing table (not shown) stood out in a crowded room as a piece made with affection and consideration, as did the Krenovian wall-hung cabinets

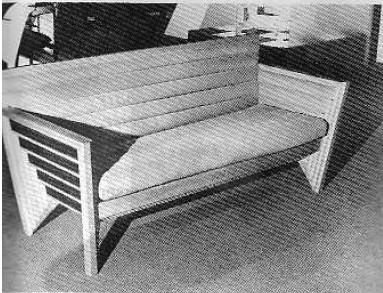
made by Rob Sperber (far left). A graceful, very sittable, almost edible upholstered chair by John Dunnigan (*FWW* #31, p. 97) was the most comfortable thing in the room, though obviously meant only for the most decorous of rumps, certainly not my scuzzy jeans. The color of this chair (my memory says a dusty mauve or peach or both) and of Dunnigan's round amaranth-topped table (not shown) with pink plastic



John Dunnigan's peach chair: 'graceful, sittable, almost edible.'

rim and wenge legs exemplified a happy trend: the use of color. The predominant hues I tasted in the summer of '82 ran from mauve to salmon with touches of rose. I remember a couple of decades ago when the color was burnt orange, and it seemed to have simultaneously occurred in all parts of the hinterland, to gather for all to squint at in the 8th Pasadena Design Show in 1962.

Salmon is a sedate tone. It drew me to Dan Bailey's velveteen-upholstered chair at Rhinebeck (*FWW* #35, p. 12), its pearwood surfaces laboriously tooled. It drew me to Janice Smith's velvet-upholstered couch (below) at the Workbench Gallery. A close look at the wood in this piece, however, revealed that the stepped forms of the sides and back, although regular, had not been matched for grain.

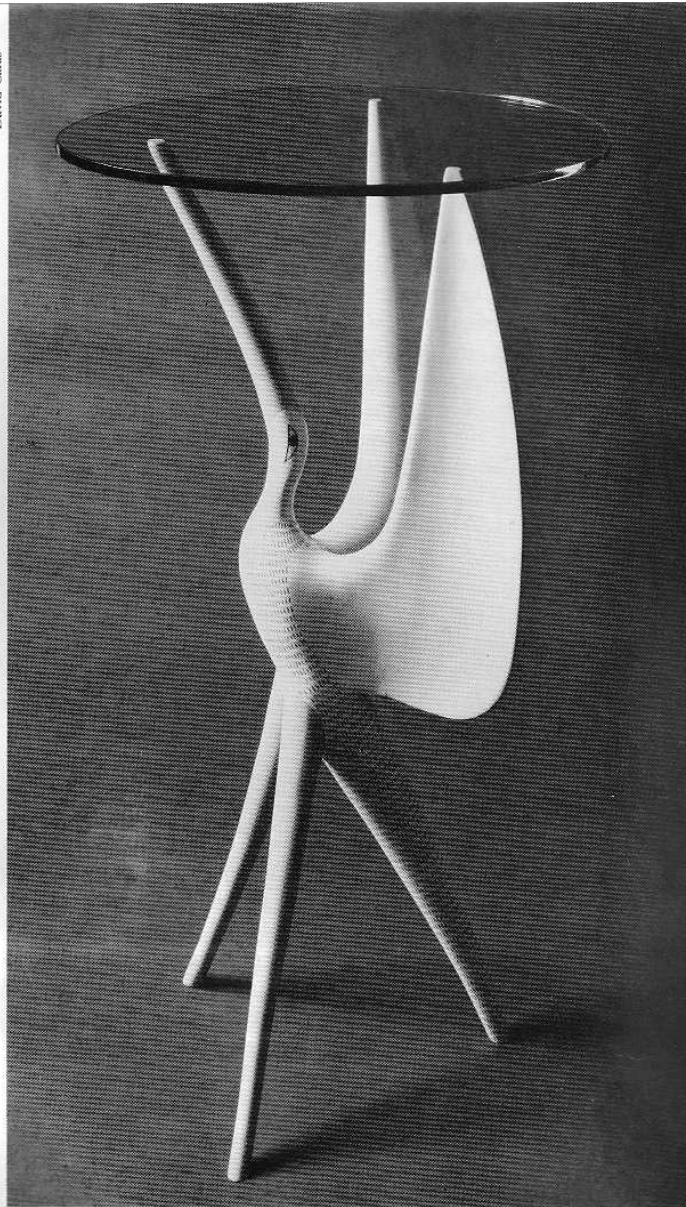


Velvet-upholstered sofa of maple and walnut by Janice Smith.

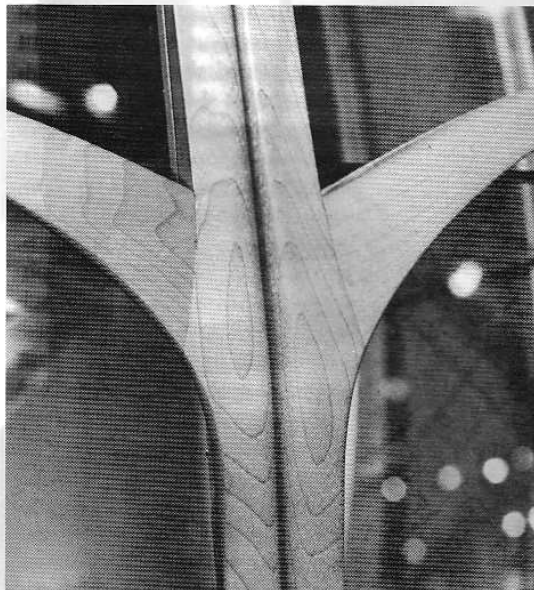
though regular, had not been matched for grain. I found this a bit disconcerting—like unaligned slots in the screws that hold hardware, it represents a forfeiture of the expression of craftsmanship. I had a similar response to her otherwise pleasing maple wall cabinet (below left). Detail should abet form, not clash with it. Another of Smith's pieces, a set of table and chairs in cherry (below right), was a harmony of curved triangles, and is comfortable furniture as well. I had no quarrel with the grain here, perhaps because cherry's figure is subdued.

Still under the friendly umbrella of furniture I would include a small glass-topped plant stand by Judy McKie (right), the glass being held up by a firmly rounded and painted stork, both playful and functional. And the work of Ed Zucca (*FWW* #30, p. 97), some of it, also functions as furniture—although the coffee table (not shown) that I saw at Pritam and Eames was fit for the Star Ship Enterprise, it would still hold a coffee cup.

I have mentioned only a portion of the work I saw, the



Stork table by Judy McKie, "...both playful and functional."



Above, a detail of Smith's wall-hung maple cabinet. The figure of the wood here does not reinforce the symmetry of the form. At right, her cherry dining set.



pieces of genuine furniture that piqued my interest during that hurried, hot week in June. But my prime concern was to understand artiture—what to make of those pieces that were in the shape of furniture but were not furniture. There is a difference between a chair as furniture and a chair as artiture. Like a tire and a doughnut, they are similar in form. Still they belong on different shelves, for they were made for different purposes. A craftsman makes a chair to afford comfort and beauty, through the apt use of material. An artist makes a chair as metaphor, through the apt use of form and/or color. Both of these activities are investigative. The craftsman starts from his chosen material and deals with the chair as a thing to be explored for its own useful sake; the artist deals with the chair as a piece of language, sometimes commenting on nothing more than itself, as with Nam June Paik's chair (below right); sometimes commenting on something other than itself, as with Margaret Wharton's "Bantam Chair" or "Recital" (below left and center).

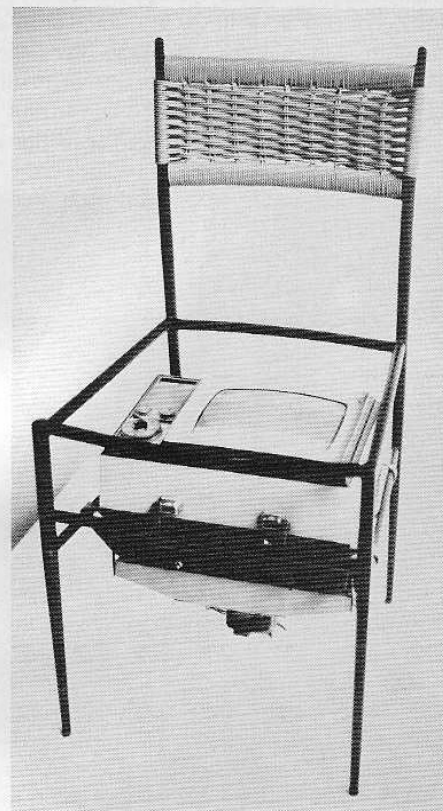
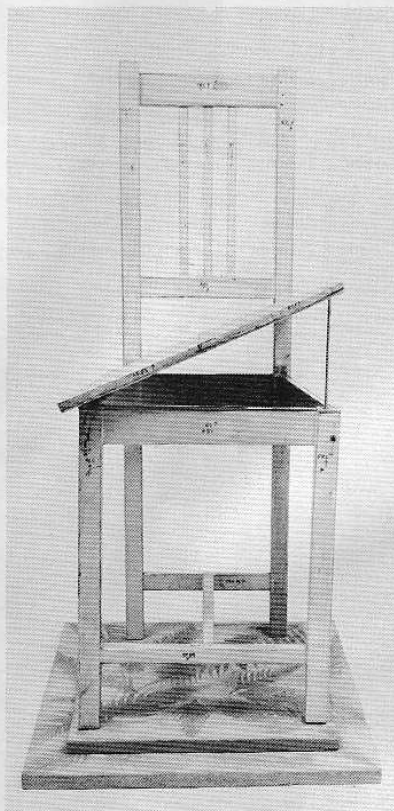
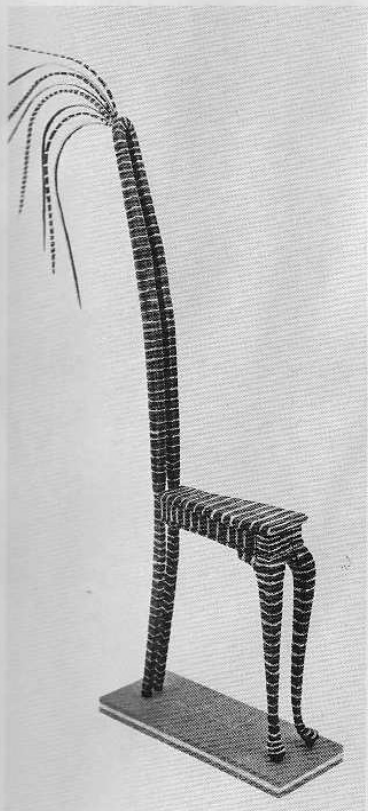
As it was displayed, much of the artiture I saw last summer was confused with furniture—both forms indiscriminately occupied the same gallery spaces. If tires and doughnuts are shown together, the effect is bound to be laughable, since you don't know from what perspective to view them. At least this was the effect on me—being slow to change gears, I kept trying mentally to sit in the art, and it didn't work. A few museums have recognized the profound difference, but other institutions have not. It would be of benefit to the public as well as to the utilitarian and the metaphorist to define the two separate endeavors when they're displayed. By my definition, "furniture" is objects made to serve a physical need.



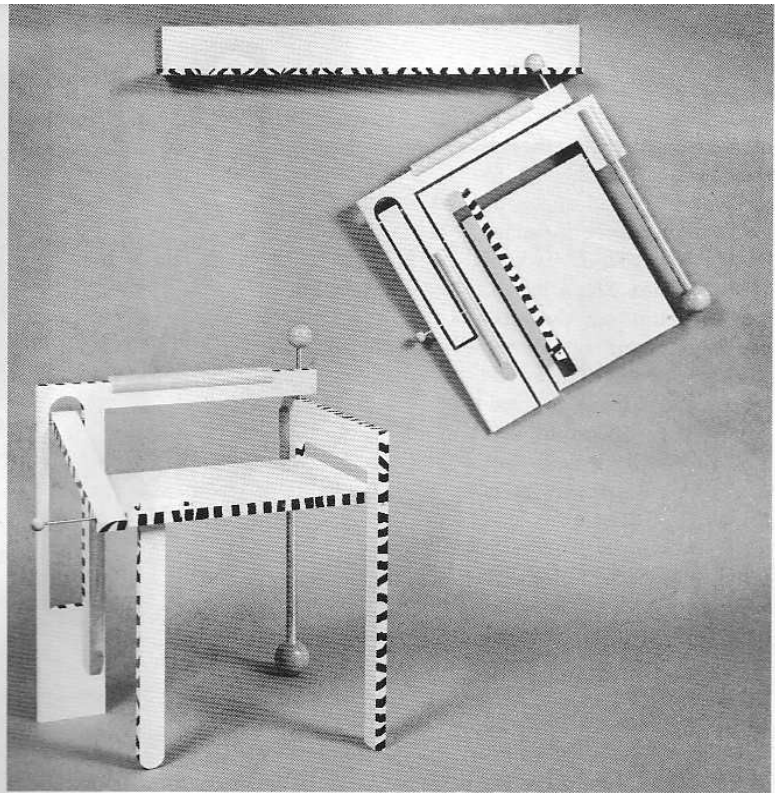
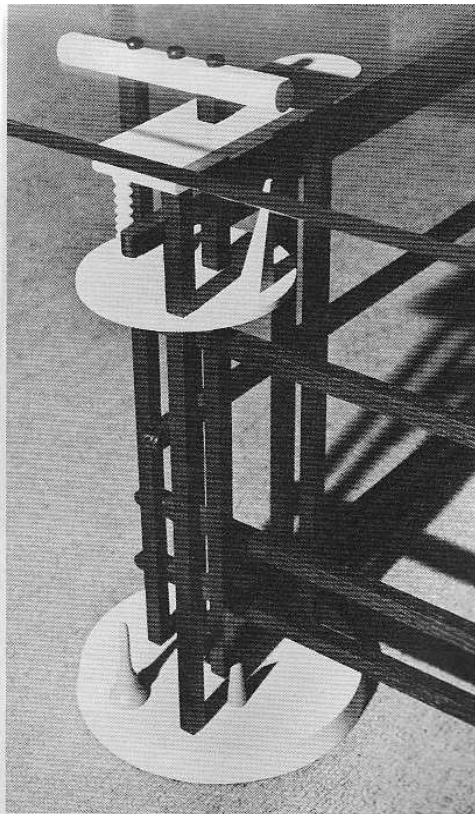
*Grey wool upholstered chair
by Tom Loeser.*

If done humanely, with skill, and with sensitivity for the user as well as to the material (whether or not it's wood), furniture can transcend function and speak to one's feelings as well. Artiture not only does not attempt this, but it is frequently antipathetic to the very ideas of humanity, craftsmanship and empathy, not to mention function. On the contrary, taken as furniture, much of it is torturous, and some of it just lies in wait for the unwary.

Among the latter I would include a dark gray triangular chair with red piping (above), made by Tom Loeser. It's an enticingly acute form, and its look of softness invites sitting. When you do, however, you find yourself stretched on the



Chair metaphor: 'Bantam Chair' and 'Recital,' by Margaret Wharton. Photos: William H. Bengtson, courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. 'TV Chair,' right, a pun by Nam June Paik, was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art.



David Casas

Detail of Loeser's coffee table, left, and his wall-hung chair.

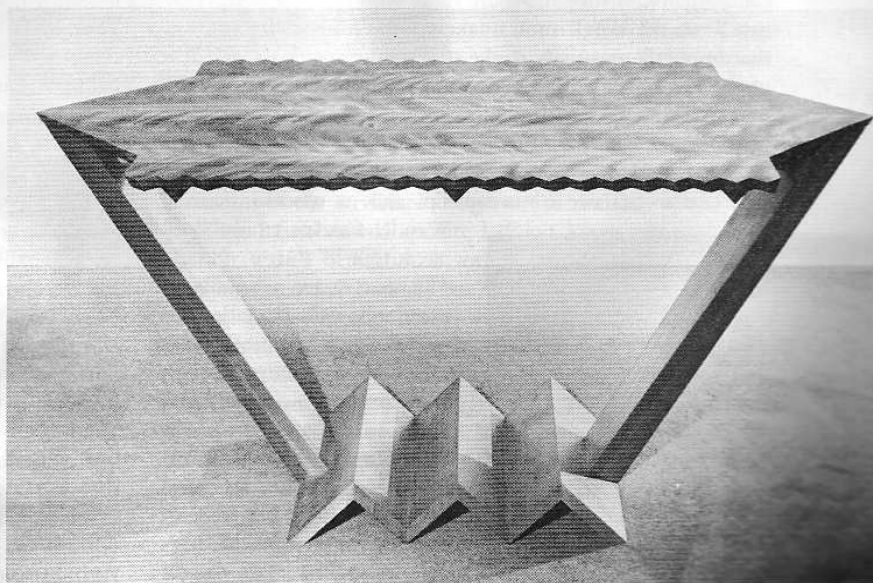
rack of discomfort. The back is too low, the seat too hard and the arms too far apart. This chair should have been defined as artiture, or some such art form, particularly because it *looks* usable. Otherwise, the tendency is to judge it by furniture criteria, which is to say unfairly. As nicely made dada, it works; furniture it ain't. Loeser's glass-topped coffee table (detail above), also seen at the Workbench Gallery, is a matrix of $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. square wooden rods painted black, with little cream and turquoise Monopoly pawns stiffly clambering among them. It felt like a futuristic cityscape, quite compelling. But then I touched it, to discover that secretly it is a wrist and ankle guillotine. The tinker-toy support would cascade the glass top through any flesh unwitting enough to bump into it. If made of welded steel, the underpinnings could function as firm support, but in wood it's like setting a man-size mousetrap.

A folding chair by Loeser, called a "wall-hung chair" made of plywood and maple (above right), was an ingenious mechanism that could be pinned into the shape of a chair or into a plaque and hung on the wall on its own hanger. At least this Loeser piece was uncompromisingly artiture, and it could not entice this country boy into risking a sit. Even so, I enjoyed Loeser's use of color and his play with space. I think he should fabricate a whole series labeled "people traps," for I saw no other work more siren-like.

Among people-traps I would include Ed Zucca's sawtoothed table (right)—one that I would hardly want to pull up to or even sidle near for fear of laceration. However, it evoked what I hope it was meant to evoke—sawteeth—and it is a remarkably appropriate shape for the sharply figured curly birch it's made from. Not much artiture is concerned with material; this was a pleasant exception.

Zucca's table is cousin to a chair (not shown) made by Samuel J. Lemly that I saw in the San Francisco Airport exhibit. It too was spiked, but to inhibit even the most unwary. A veritable ironmaiden, but couchant, its seat was a multitude of pointed pieces of wood. I can only assume that this was a projection of someone with a horrible itch or a rather inhospitable comment about mankind in its sitting position.

The airport show was a mine of artiture, with only a smattering of furniture. There was a hat sculptured on a chair, titled "Texas Taste," by Robert Bourdon, all of wood and exacting workmanship (top left, p. 102). There were mice on a chair by Clarice Dreyer (top right, p. 102)—a folding chair painted white, with black aluminum rodents affixed to various surfaces. It was titled "Tomorrow's Yesterday," and it evoked for me a feeling of abandonment, or of the aftermath

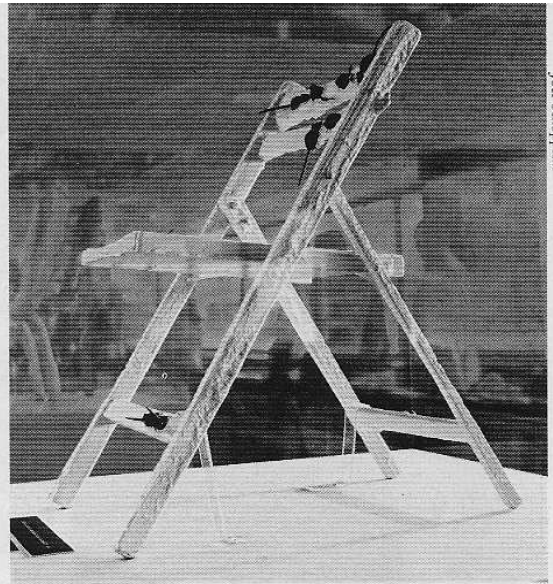


Curly birch sawtooth table by Ed Zucca.

of World War III, though then even the mice will be dead on the dead chairs. A gargantuan cane chair done by David Ireland, entitled "South China Sea," proved that the form was the form, no matter what the scale. There was "Turquoise Table," a three-crooked-legged table by Rita Yokoi, which looked like papier-mâché painted by a Fauvist, and there was a steel table by Michael Todd, labeled "Kandinsky Table," warmed-over visual art. Perhaps I shouldn't label these and Yokoi's and Todd's other tables at the SF Airport "artiture," for they would function in appropriate settings, but they are intentionally much more self-conscious than serviceable. But then again, so is a lot of 19th-century furniture.

Most artiture pieces had little to do with wood and less to do with craftsmanship, but they used a form traditionally crafted in wood to make some comment and/or a visual joke. Percy Gibbar's right-angular plywood construct with fish collage on all surfaces was entitled "Sportsman's Chair." It was sittable, though that obviously was not the point. So with Nam June Paik's "TV Chair" (bottom right, p. 100), seen at New York's Whitney Museum. Paik's pun was somewhat stronger than Gibbar's: a TV slung below the seat of a chair frame, the TV facing up with a steady picture of itself via a video camera on the ceiling. At the same Whitney show were a group of chair forms by Lucas Samaras, wildly painted and manipulated, called "Chair Transformations." Miro might have done these, if he'd painted in 3D with a square toothpaste tube.

I would guess that most makers of artiture call themselves artists. A contemporary definition, recently hazarded by a conceptualist, is that artists are those who call themselves artists. I wouldn't call most makers of artiture craftsmen, for that implies a sensitivity to the structure of materials, and few of the pieces I saw evidenced much concern for that. Whatever would work to fit the idea was used—or whatever was at hand. Not many make artiture from a craft base. Part of the reason, I'm sure, is the time and patience needed to acquire skill and to practice craftsmanship, and its modest rewards.

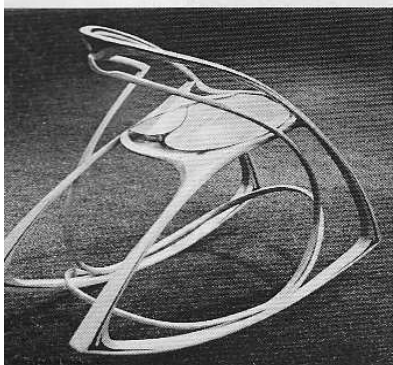


Chairs with titles: "Texas Taste," left, by Robert Bourdon, and "Tomorrow's Yesterday," by Clarice Dreyer.

ery, a tour de force of craftsmanship which if taken a step further could have become a parody of the bender's art.

The chair is the most prevalent form of artiture, perhaps because the chair is immediately recognizable and offers many more possibilities of form and meaning than the inverted U's of tables, the boxes of chests or the ambiguity of stands. It also is the form that is most intimate with the human body and therefore perhaps conveys more meaning consciously and unconsciously than other furniture forms. Crude artifacts for sitting probably were the first furniture. They are the elevators of people, both literally and figuratively.

At Pritam and Eames, Wendy Maruyama exhibited her renditions of chair artiture, more static than those of either Samaras or Rising. Maruyama had three prosaic square-framed wood chairs (one is shown below) that were painted as if by Jackson Pollock in three circus colors, with a pane of heavy glass as the seat upholstery. They reminded me of the many kitchen chairs I've seen that have been used as painters' easels or as stools for house

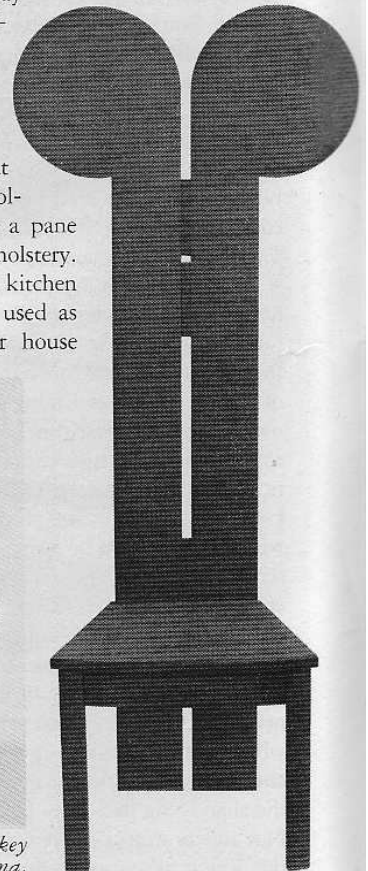


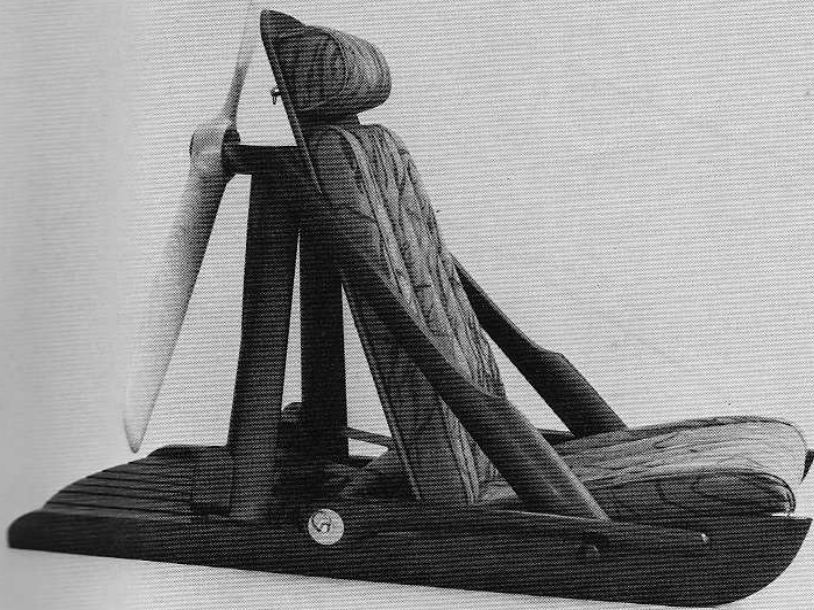
Martha Rising's bentwood rocker.

Wendel Castle's tromp l'oeil pieces (*FWW* #11, p. 48, and #12, p. 87) are a prominent exception: artiture made with careful skill. Another such exception is Martha Rising's chair form (left) entitled "Delight," which was part of the SF Airport show. As furniture it could easily be called "Hazard," for it has some of the siren overtones of Loeser's work. But it is a delight of bent forms and fine join-



Glass-topped chair and Mickey Mouse chair, by Wendy Maruyama.



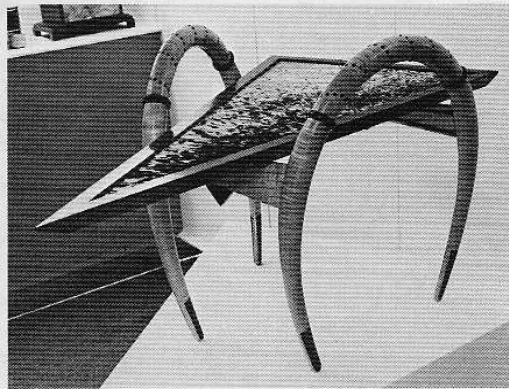


By Jim Fawcett: 'Experimental Craft #2,' in wenge, spruce and fabric, above, and 'Window Shade' in spruce, lignum, beech and canvas.



painting. But the glass said "keep off," or maybe "under glass," a signal to the initiated that this was not abused furniture, but pure artiture. Maruyama also had a chair painted speckled charcoal (facing page) with a 6-ft. long back ending in large circle forms that unfortunately (or so I thought) reminded me of Mickey Mouse. Once that happens, forget it—all one ever sees is Mickey Mouse, no matter how serious the designer's purpose. Later I learned that Maruyama herself refers to the piece as her Mickey Mouse chair, and I was delighted, for I see the chair now as a parody of the regality and puffery of high-backed chairs. I don't know whether Maruyama sees it this way, but artiture when it teases the seriousness of furniture, even gratuitously, does service. As in Loeser's pieces, I came to enjoy the color, flair, fantasy and whimsy.

Like all categorizations, the term "artiture" is a convenience, a net that doesn't catch all the non-utilitarian fish. Some just have their tails caught. Such is the work of Jim Fawcett, whose pieces at the Workbench Gallery (top) were fetish furniture for pilots—those in the air and on the sea. His propeller-propped seating experiments cover both monoplane and helicopter; the lighthouse cabinet is probably as effective as a lighthouse as it is as a cabinet; and the wall-hung piece labeled "Window Shade" was as evocative of sailing as any visual metaphor I can remember. All these were done with fine craftsmanship and spirit, well worked wood and tastefully selected hardware. They also stepped outside of furniture in that they dared to not take the traditional form of their semi-functional function.



Steve Madsen's ebony, maple, cowhide 'Night Stalker.'

There is not space enough to go into all the treen on view in that week in June and its mythic and ritualistic evocation, but a little table (left) that I saw at Rhinebeck had obviously sprung from this venerable craft—its maker, Steve Madsen, is recognized for his finely wrought constructs. This triangular, skin-topped and horny-legged form (after the Art Deco artist Clement Rousseau) is an example of the fine, crisp,

exacting detail work that went out with Art Deco and is now reappearing with its renaissance. I'm impressed with the intricate craftsmanship in many of the pieces I saw. Just so long as it remains in the service of design and is not the object of it.

When I first viewed artiture I didn't know what to make of it. It wasn't beautiful, it wasn't usable and it didn't say anything to me. It seemed an acquiescence to the lopsided cultural hierarchy of wit over feeling, cleverness over discipline. I still feel this way about a good deal of what I see. But then there are artists like Margaret Wharton, who can say so much with her chair metaphor, or Nam June Paik, who can play so tongue in cheek with a chair frame, and there are craftspeople like Martha Rising, exercising her medium to its limit, all around the form of the chair, and it's okay. □

Art Carpenter is a furnituremaker and teacher in Bolinas, Calif. For a profile of Carpenter's own work, see FWW #37, pp. 62-68.