

1970

## Sculptural Furniture

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SCULPTURAL FURNITURE

A Thesis

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty

Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Gary Galbraith

July, 1970

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## Sculptural Furniture

Anthropologists have suggested that early man evolved through a stage in which his thumb separated from the fingers and thusly formed a hand with which he could grasp the branch of a tree. It is presumed that man thereby elevated himself into the world of the tree, which offered him an environment of defense and survival from the predators running on the ground below. It could be said that nature was the architect that designed this environment in which early man lived. Man has since attempted to design for the comfort of his own needs, often separating the elements of his environment into fragmentized pieces that have forgotten the whole. We should perhaps, then, re-examine the tree as a symbol which represents the integration of man's basic needs of shelter and recline through the applied arts of architecture and furniture. We might then recall our childhood days of constructing platforms of defense and seclusion in tree limbs as the activity of building and arranging furniture in nature's house - the tree. Ideally, as the tree served other functions for man aside from shelter and comfortable recline, so should the chair.

The making of furniture represents a turning point for me. It is a new direction because it involves the application of sculptural form to functional human participation. Previous to this turning point my sculpture was determined for a pedestaled presentation in an art gallery. Now sculpture by means of furniture has become a

part of my everyday living space. Sculpture had for me become too lofty and intellectually elite in intention. It had done so by addressing itself to art history and its wordy definitions, rather than to the responsibility of educating society's visual awareness.

The change to furniture put my sculpture into the scale of actual human dimension. Previously my sculpture was experienced as a model of illusion presented on a pedestal where the viewer could imagine it to be of any size. Furniture also brought sculpture down to the floor onto the same plane that man stood and examined from the base as platform and foundation and idealized container have been abandoned. The object as furniture is now actual and direct and something more than a pictorial image. Sculptural furniture for me now has a presence as an object of environment. The space each piece deals with is human space, not negative space, as background. Such space can then become a tangible volume to be shaped by the artist. Furniture of the past dealt with the human figure as a set of dimensions and not as a volume that could be surrounded by movement, suggesting qualities of protection and suspension. Space that utilizes such qualities can then become a source of expression.

When an artist approaches the making of an object of furniture he has the responsibility of being aware of the tradition of craftsmanship within furniture and the historical development of the design of the object. As an artist he must extend beyond this tradition by adding a new point of view to the development of the object which is attuned within his time. His direct experiences must become

a part of the conscious design of the form as well as his concern for the definition of the object in relation to the history of mankind. The artist should employ his sense of playful experimentation that requires the re-investigation of old manners and styles. I have attempted to apply the imagination of my senses to the furniture object in order to satisfy other human needs aside from comfort. These artistic requirements remove the piece of furniture from the realm of neutrality and tastefulness and expect the viewer - user to experience visual communication.

It is not coincidental that I have made some children's furniture. It is my observation that the adult glances with temporary commitment, whereas the child turns loose his panorama of senses until the fulfillment of an experience has occurred. The child has the daring to discover for himself the full potential of participating with an object. The child does not begin with the application of a preconceived concept of beauty. He arrives at a concept of beauty having examined a new experience with prior learned intelligence and direct sensory perception. The adult has substituted pigeon - holing for the acquiring of new formulation. I would be pleased if adult viewers were more child - like in their response to my sculptural furniture.

Since I have come to furniture by way of sculpture, it would be of interest to clarify some of the aspects of my sculptural background which have influenced my furniture pieces. Almost all

of my previous sculpture dealt with qualities of living form as exhibited by nature in the abstract. As such I was influenced by systems of biological organization and the philosophical concern for vitalism as a search for the hidden life force within nature. I later went through a period in which the organic type of form was depicted in conflict with basic three dimensional formal geometry. This collision of emotional and logical qualities produced a third phase of development in which the playful realm of surreal fantasy emerged. Gradually the images of fantasy dealt more and more with a stratified spacial landscape offering differing contexts of scaled relationships. Where once a mood of emotional expressionism prevailed, now a mood of peaceful contemplation exists. The excitement of feeling is now overshadowed by the perceptual logic of formal relationships. The test of professional quality in art is not whether one has imagination on the interior but rather can the personal relationships within visual form be expressed to others on the exterior.

One of my main concerns in the design of furniture has been to eliminate the necessity of chairs having four vertical legs that act as stilts which then elevate the seat platform. This manner of construction has been strongly related to architectural building. Perhaps the reason for this is that architects predominantly design our furniture. My first inquiries into this matter were three legged stools. These primarily eliminated the reference to rectangular



volumn type construction whereby structural elements appear primarily out of corner junctions. The type of construction that offered me the most challenging potential was the cantilever. On the level of skilled employment of woodcraft, the cantilever required revised methods of constructing the form instead of the usual sandwiching of horizontal layers of glued wood. The cantilever required an examination of the basic structure of each three-dimensional form. In effect, one had to discover the basic skeleton that lay within the form upon which external aspects are added.

An important visual quality that the cantilever presents is that of floatation or buoyancy. This buoyancy projects a renewed attention onto the spatial volumns under and surrounding the cantilever. Contrasted to the four legged stilt chair where the seating platform is static or in a state of neutral elevation, I have attempted to give the viewer a visual cushion rather than an upholstered one.

The diagonal movement inherent to the cantilever forced a dynamic utilization of movement in counter-balance. It wasn't long before all elements of movement throughout the piece of furniture reflected a complex system of visual balance that relied upon the curve. This reliance required the use of steambending in order to attain a graceful, delicate line of movement and structure. The

form-making process and the final visual result are bound together as one dependent upon the other. Steambending also allows the wood to remain elastic and thereby respond to the weight of the seated person, thus giving the chair an aliveness.

The remaining element of consideration here is that of choice of material. It is of particular interest since many new materials are available today as products of our technology. If one examines the tradition of furniture it can easily be seen that furniture is almost entirely dependent upon wood as the dominant material. Within that heritage a craftsman accepts his material for what it is: economical, readily available, strong and light-weight with a variety of colors and grain patterns. It now turns out that all of these same attributes are available through the plastics industry. Some people would say that plastics depersonalize the finished piece by giving it an anonymous identity. It is my point of view that as the material is fed through a process it becomes a result of the technical craft employed. Thus anonymity could be re-inforced by the quantity and quality of machinery employed. The form as a finished image is illustrative of a particular process of making.

My choice of wood as the dominant material in my furniture is because of the relationship that I have to the process of forming and the related growth of a sculptural idea. There are several stages of developing the shape of an idea that relate to the constructive manner in which wood can be formed. It is my preference to work

the wood primarily with hand tools that keep the material directly shaped by controlled manipulation of the tools via the senses of the hand. This represents the belief that sensory information that is accumulative and immediate passes more readily through the hand tool because it is merely an extension of the hand, whereas the machine is a separate entity. This is meaningful because I am trying to make furniture objects as unique sensory experiences rather than products of design.

I think that wood also contains some psychological factors that are inherent to the material as part of a tradition. One's familiarity with wood furniture as a precedent offers a security of comfort that the new plastics have not acquired. Plastics have the connotation of being immediate and temporary, thereby affecting the users sense of comfort. Wood could well be archetypal, meaning that it belongs to the collective human unconscious as a psychic force of heredity. This aspect of the material may then return us to the primitive mythologies that surround the tree. In Europe the most highly venerated tree was the mighty red oak. The reason for this was because of its majestic appearance as well as the fact that it was most often struck by lightning. A tree that so often received the sacred fire of heaven was clearly a favorite of the gods, perhaps even the seat of a deity.

Prior to rubbing two sticks together the only way to make a fire was to steal it from a burning branch that had received the fire

from heaven. Miracles were often conceived about this majestic act of fire transfer. Fire may have been conceptualized as a property of the tree from which one could extract it like sap. Indians of a California tribe have a legend in which the world was originally a mass of fire which gradually withdrew into the interior of the earth; from there it passed through the roots into trunks and branches of trees, from which it could then be extracted with fire drills.

The tree is both symbol and object. It is a treasury of mysterious forces that man may contemplate while he reclines in her branches.



Saddle Stool

H W D  
laminated oak, 24"x17"x15"  
June, 1969



Rocking Chair

H W D  
oak, leather, 23"x49"x39"  
August, 1969



Love Seat, laminated oak, 39"x59"x29"  
November, 1969



Love Seat



Child's Rocking Horse, laminated oak, 27"x28"x41"  
December, 1969





Space Seat  
laminated oak and walnut  
with leather and aluminum,  
47"x29"x58"  
February, 1970

Space Seat







Butterfly Chair, laminated oak, 54"x47"x45"  
June, 1970



Butterfly Chair