

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

## Wendell Castle Furniture Takes Center Stage in Wexler Gallery's Salon Art + Design Booth

A cherry-wood dining set is expected to fetch over \$300,000

TEXT BY

MITCHELL OWENS

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A dining set by Wendell Castle at Wexler Gallery's Salon booth.

Photo: Courtesy of Wexler Gallery

Wendell Castle, high priest of the American studio craft movement, once wrote: “If you hit the bullseye every time, the target is too near.” That being said, fans of Castle, who died in January at the age of 85, would be hard-pressed to cite any of the master’s creations that weren’t wild successes, particularly the furniture for which he became renowned and was invariably called “biomorphic” by some and “baffling” by others.

There were undulating settees hand-carved out of stacked and laminated wood (a Castle leitmotif), a brightly painted chest of drawers that appears to be running across the room on human legs, fiberglass chairs shaped like molars, and a desk with a sharp, whirling silhouette that brings to mind—to my mind, at least—a scythe cutting through a field of wheat in Castle’s native Kansas. If his extravagant, exceptionally plastic designs seemed to be more artful than they were practical, a frequent critical observation, Castle was fine with that, since he approached furniture and lighting, whether made of wood, cement, fiberglass, metal, or stone, with the eye of the artist he had been in his youth. As he explained in a 2012 oral history, “I think the only reason that I could give up sculpture and make furniture is because I thought the vocabulary was the same.”



The table features a fan-shaped inlay.

Photo: Courtesy of Wexler Gallery

At *The Salon Art + Design*, which opens tonight at New York’s Park Avenue Armory and runs through November 12, a group of highly useful but satisfyingly exaggerated Castle furnishings, dating from 1980, are the stars of Philadelphia’s *Wexler Gallery* booth, A-5. One is an oval double-pedestal dining table topped with inlaid stripes that radiate out from an off-center pivot point like an open fan, and the others are eight matching armchairs that bring to mind Frank Lloyd Wright’s barrel chairs yet are so sinuous and extruded in appearance they might as well be made from pulled taffy rather than cherry wood. The price for the nine pieces, I was told, is “in the upper \$300,000s.”



The table’s carved base.

Photo: Courtesy of Wexler Gallery

“I would argue that they are some of the most magnificent pieces I’ve had the honor of presenting,” Lewis Wexler, the gallery’s co-owner and a Christie’s alumnus, told me as he was setting up the booth for *The Salon*’s opening day, adding that this particular set was previously owned by an unnamed Philadelphia collector. “Wendell did variations on these pieces during his career, not a lot, but they are out there—most of them in private hands, so rarely do you ever see them come on the market.”

Though Castle's baroque silhouettes instantly transfix, Wexberg points out that the designer, who lived in and worked in Scottsville, New York, was a genius when it came to incorporating intimate, amusing details. "The ebony pivot point, the double pedestals of stacked and laminated wood that are carved like tree trunks, the elongated triangles that fan out across the tabletop," he enthuses. "The materials, wood and leather, are warm and inviting, and the scale is wonderful, too. Combine all those things and the set is really a masterpiece."