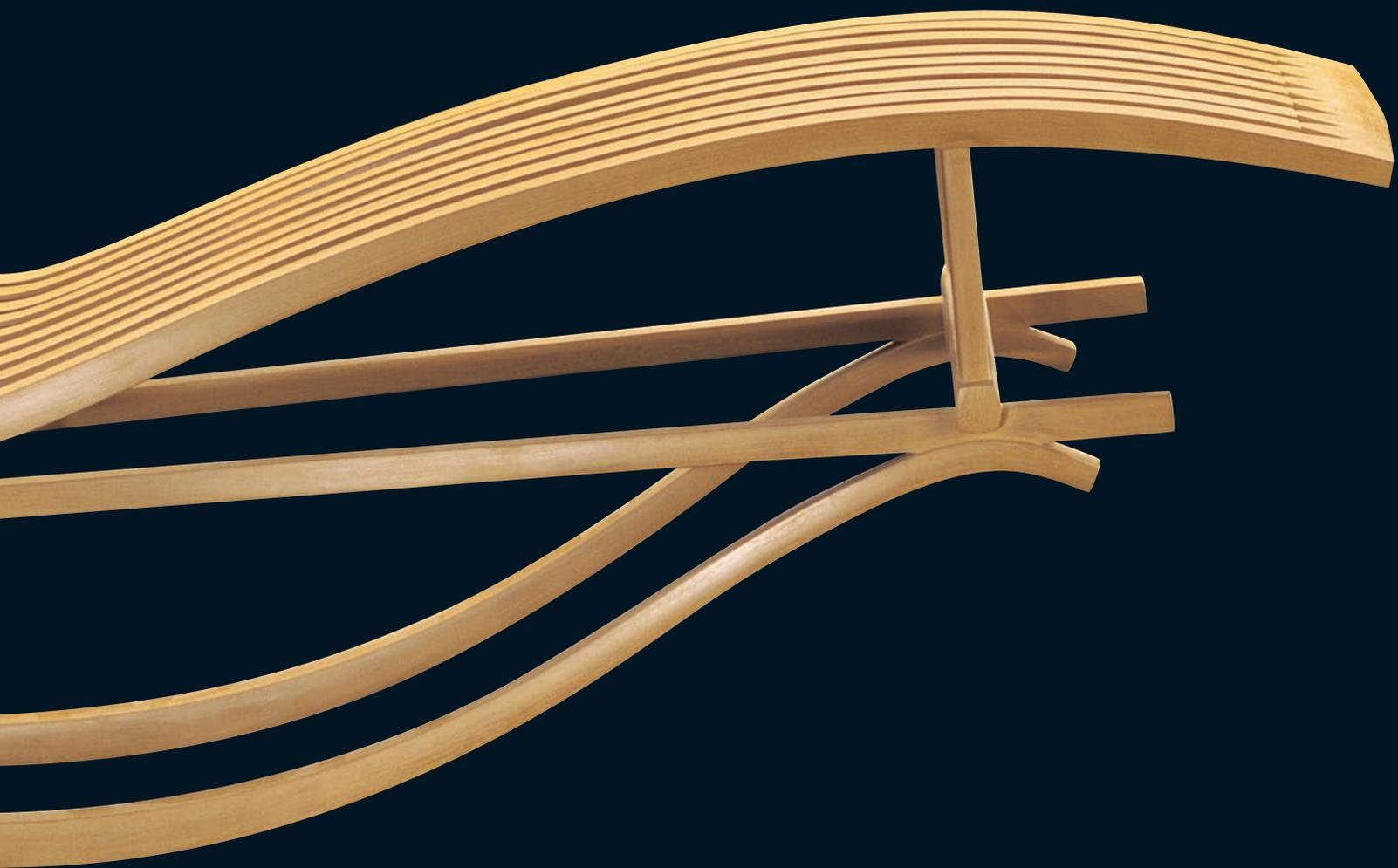


# STUDIO FURNITURE

*of the* RENWICK GALLERY  
*Smithsonian American Art Museum*



STUDIO  
FURNITURE





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*Smithsonian American Art Museum*

Oscar P. Fitzgerald

*Foreword by*  
Paul Greenhalgh

Smithsonian American Art Museum  
Washington, D.C.

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of the Renwick Gallery  
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by Oscar P. Fitzgerald  
Foreword by Paul Greenhalgh

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The Smithsonian American Art Museum is  
home to one of the largest collections of  
American art in the world. Its holdings—more  
than 41,000 works—tell the story of America  
through the visual arts and represent the most  
inclusive collection of American art in any  
museum today. It is the nation's first federal art  
collection, predating the 1846 founding of the  
Smithsonian Institution. The museum celebrates  
the exceptional creativity of the nation's artists  
whose insights into history, society, and the  
individual reveal the essence of the American  
experience.

The Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian  
American Art Museum is dedicated to exhibiting  
American crafts and decorative arts from the  
nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries.



Smithsonian American Art Museum

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## Foreword

FURNITURE IS THE MOST OVERTLY FUNCTIONAL AND physical of all the arts. It keeps our bodies off the ground; it supports our repose; it provides our work surfaces; it stores and protects the stuff we eat and wear; and it protects and contains those precious things with which we choose to surround ourselves. It is core to our material existence.

But it is so much more. Furniture always has been a principal vehicle of human expression, from the earliest examples that have survived through the millennia up to the present. It has been a cultural signifier of prime importance, giving us indications as to the nature of the lives of those who made and used it. To look at ancient Egyptian or Chinese, eighteenth-century English, or nineteenth-century American Shaker furniture is to be presented with an essay on the social and spiritual mores of those peoples. It is an indicator of civilization.

Furniture is perhaps more allied to architecture than any of the other individual craft-based arts. It renders architecture useful in its normative functions, and it humanizes it. Some of the greatest furniture was designed by architects. Indeed, the reverse also is true. Robert Adam and Gerrit Rietveld, for example, provided the eighteenth and twentieth centuries respectively with seminal furnishings and buildings.

Apart from the heritage tying it to architecture, furniture has always been, and is, a freestanding art. And as such, it would in some senses be fair to say that as an art, it lost ground in the twentieth

century. The loss was at least in part due to one of the most dominant philosophical positions on the production of modernist furniture, which insisted on focusing not on furniture as art, as a vehicle for individual and cultural expression, but on furniture as purely mechanical, as equipment for use in the domestic and work environments. Indeed, the whole world of ornamentation and decoration—as art—came under challenge in this period, and as such, furniture came under pressure to simplify its role in our culture.

It is in this regard that the role of the modern crafts has been vital. From the later nineteenth century, generation after generation of modern craftspeople struggled, against the functionalist trend, to maintain the possibility that furniture could be a medium for individual expression, as well as the conduit through which the history of furniture, and the people who created it, could be continually revisited. From the arts and crafts movement and the masters of art nouveau and the secession, through to the masters of the studio crafts movements of the later twentieth century, furniture has continued to serve as a medium for intellectual and emotional expression and as a vehicle for cultural memory.

I would say that after phenomenal development through the first half of the twentieth century, by 1970, America had become a dominant nation across much of craft practice. American ceramics and glass artists, for example, were absolutely core to the efflorescence of those practices

into a sculptural, expressive, and dramatic new tradition. American jewelers took full part in the dramatic evolution that saw jewelry become a conceptually driven discourse. And fiber artists pushed textile art into wholly new realms.

The furniture world was, on the whole, less cohesive and dramatic than these other genres and unfolded in a more subtle and complex way. It never had a movement. There is no one cohesive school or intellectual thrust in American furniture making, but rather, a number of seams of activity. Some makers remained broadly loyal to what might be termed the arts-and-crafts tradition, at its most powerful in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century; others effectively combined wood carving with furniture to forge a more sculptural practice; some used popular and folk imagery to make witty and cryptic comments on life; some blended in with mainstream design; and yet others developed conceptual approaches that questioned the very nature of furniture itself. It has been a rich diversity, and one that can be collectively assessed only with rigorous and patient scholarship. That is where this book comes in.

The Renwick Gallery's studio furniture collection is a vital resource for the study and appreciation of American furniture. The eighty-four examples catalogued here constitute one of the most important American collections. Like all museum collections, and of course museums themselves, there is often little in the way of logic in the initial founding impetus. Vacated by the

U.S. Court of Claims, the historic building that is now the Renwick Gallery lay vacant until First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy advocated a viable program and purpose for it. The government then transferred the building to the Smithsonian Institution.

When the Renwick Gallery was formed in 1972, it had no mandate to build a collection. Beginning in the mid-1980s, under the leadership of National Museum of American Art Director Charles Eldredge, the Renwick formed a policy to collect. From then on, it did so with intelligence and gusto.

*Studio Furniture* is a seminal contribution to furniture literature. It seems to me that above all else it does three things. First, it is an absolutely vital resource for the history of modern American furniture makers. The biographies and bibliographies of these central makers provide the student, collector, and educated layperson with the foundation for study. Second, taken as a whole, the volume is a concise history of modern American furniture practice. Third, the catalogue is a brilliant institutional history of American craft.

Modern American furniture makers have been open and experimental with regard to diverse materials. Many practice with metal, fiber, plastic, and found materials. Nevertheless, at the core of the furniture genre is wood. And in the twentieth century, that has been the single greatest contribution of the American masters. In a nation blessed with extraordinary supplies of the

raw material and émigrés from rich furniture-making countries, the environment for a continuing tradition of expressive wooden furniture was always here. Accordingly, as these pages reveal, the tradition of wooden furniture has been maintained and pushed into wholly new terrain. The range is remarkable—from the raw expressiveness of Garry Knox Bennett to the breathtaking exactitude of Wendell Castle; from the virtuosity of John Cederquist to the eclectic, adjusted traditionalism of Daniel Mack; from the classic

seriousness of Wharton Esherick to the subversiveness of Jacob Cress.

Perhaps this returns me to my earlier point. Furniture is simultaneously the most functional and physical of craft media, but it is also redolent with conceptual, historiographic, and individual narrative. Perhaps more than any other group internationally during the last fifty years, the American artists chronicled in *Studio Furniture* have reminded us such narratives always have been part of the furniture universe. We owe them much.

Paul Greenhalgh  
*Director, The Corcoran Gallery of Art*  
*Washington, D.C.*

## Acknowledgments

THE AUTHOR'S NAME APPEARS ON THE TITLE PAGE, but no book is possible without the help of countless friends and colleagues who contribute in both small and large ways to make it a reality. First and foremost is Charlene Johnson, who completed the daunting task of compiling the bibliography and biographical sketches that bring to life each of the artists represented in the Renwick collection. As a student, collector, scholar, and studio artist in her own right, Johnson has been a constant advisor, reader, and friend without whom this project might never have been completed.

The research really began with my spring 2003 Studio Furniture class at the Smithsonian Institution/Parsons School of Design masters program in the decorative arts. Several of my students that semester interviewed artists in the Renwick collection about their work. The students included Christian Chute, Marcee Craighill, Samira Farmer, Kate Hughes, Pam Lict, Kate Livie, April Pride, Virginia Waring, and Betsy Davison. Davison and Allison Byrd completed similar assignments in subsequent classes. As part of an independent study project, Kyra Swanson identified all of the furniture makers who received National Endowment for the Humanities awards.

I am grateful to the James Renwick Alliance for awarding me a research fellowship in 2004 that allowed me to begin my study of the collection and for encouraging my work ever since. I am particularly grateful to past presidents John Kotely and Diane Grainer, and to former vice

president Marc Grainer, for their unstinting support and advice. The fellowship allowed me to conduct telephone interviews with the artists, and that information forms the basis for the catalogue entries. Each artist generously reviewed my draft for accuracy.

I am particularly indebted to the staff of the Renwick Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) for the countless hours they have lavished on this project. Without the Renwick artist files, it would have been difficult to complete this book. The custodian of the invaluable records is Marguerite Hergesheimer, who tolerated repeated interruptions to provide details whenever I asked. Robyn Kennedy, the administrator of the Renwick, and her assistant, Rebecca Robinson, always were there to offer ongoing support and encouragement.

The manuscript benefited immeasurably from the diligent and careful editing by Tiffany Farrell, the finest editor with whom I have had the pleasure of working. The book is far better as a result of her hard work. Words are important, but the layout and design by Karen Siatras also is critical for understanding and appreciating the work. Richard Sorensen, the keeper of the images, also was indispensable in locating photography of the furniture. Much of the collection was expertly photographed by Bruce Miller, a project supported by a grant from the James Renwick Alliance. SAAM staff photographers Gene Young and Mildred Baldwin also provided stunning shots.

To Betsy Broun and Rachel Allen, the director and deputy director of SAAM, I extend special thanks for supporting this catalogue from the very beginning and making it happen. Having been personally involved with the Renwick from its early years, Broun offered many invaluable insights only first-hand experience could provide.

I want to especially thank the former curators-in-charge of the Renwick—Lloyd Herman, Michael Monroe, and Kenneth Trapp—and former curator Jeremy Adamson, for reading my manuscript and offering many helpful comments and suggestions that have enabled me to write an accurate and clear history of the collection.

Colleagues at other institutions graciously provided lists of studio furniture in their charge as a comparison to the Renwick collection. The colleagues included Pat Warner at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Kristin Watts at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina; and Thomas Michie at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Several gallery owners have provided much appreciated advice, including Louis Wexler of Wexler Gallery, Rick Snyderman of Snyderman Gallery in Philadelphia, and Vena Sengh at Sansar Gallery in Bethesda, Maryland. These longtime

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Finally, I am indebted to John Kelsey for introducing me to Fox Chapel Publishing and to Alan Giagnocavo, the president, both of whom have been enthusiastic about *Studio Furniture* from the beginning.

Throughout it all, my wife, Toby, showed remarkable forbearance as I struggled with the manuscript and the publication process. She was even persuaded to read a few drafts and offered many helpful suggestions.

I am encouraged that a new generation of collectors has begun to discover the work of studio furniture makers. Although my daughter, Molly, leads a peripatetic life in the field of international public health, she appreciates fine craftsmanship and design. My son, Michael, a university chemistry professor, has begun to furnish his home with studio furniture. Even my granddaughters, Madeline and Emily, seem to delight in our fledgling studio furniture collection. It is to my family and the new generation of studio furniture enthusiasts that this book is dedicated.





# TOM LOESER

born 1956  
Boston, Massachusetts

## *Four by Four*\*

1994, mahogany with acrylic and milk paint, 44 ¼ × 33 ¾ × 17. Gift of Robert and Gayle Greenhill, Eleanor T. and Samuel J. Rosenfeld, anonymous contributors, and museum purchase, 1995.92

TOM LOESER HAS BUILT MANY CABINETS AND CHESTS with multiple drawers, but in most of them, he manipulated the drawers or used tricky mechanisms. This cabinet, part of a series of three, is primarily about structure, using color to bring out the geometry of the piece. Even the title, *Four by Four*, emphasizes the number of drawers and the drawer configuration. Influenced by the Memphis Group and by Alphonse Mattia at the Program in Artisanry, from which he graduated in 1982, Loeser has been a pioneer in the use of paint on wood since the early 1980s. Since 1991, he has headed the University of Wisconsin at Madison's woodworking and furniture design program, which was founded by Skip Johnson in 1965. Some of Loeser's most recent furniture incorporates a kinetic dimension.

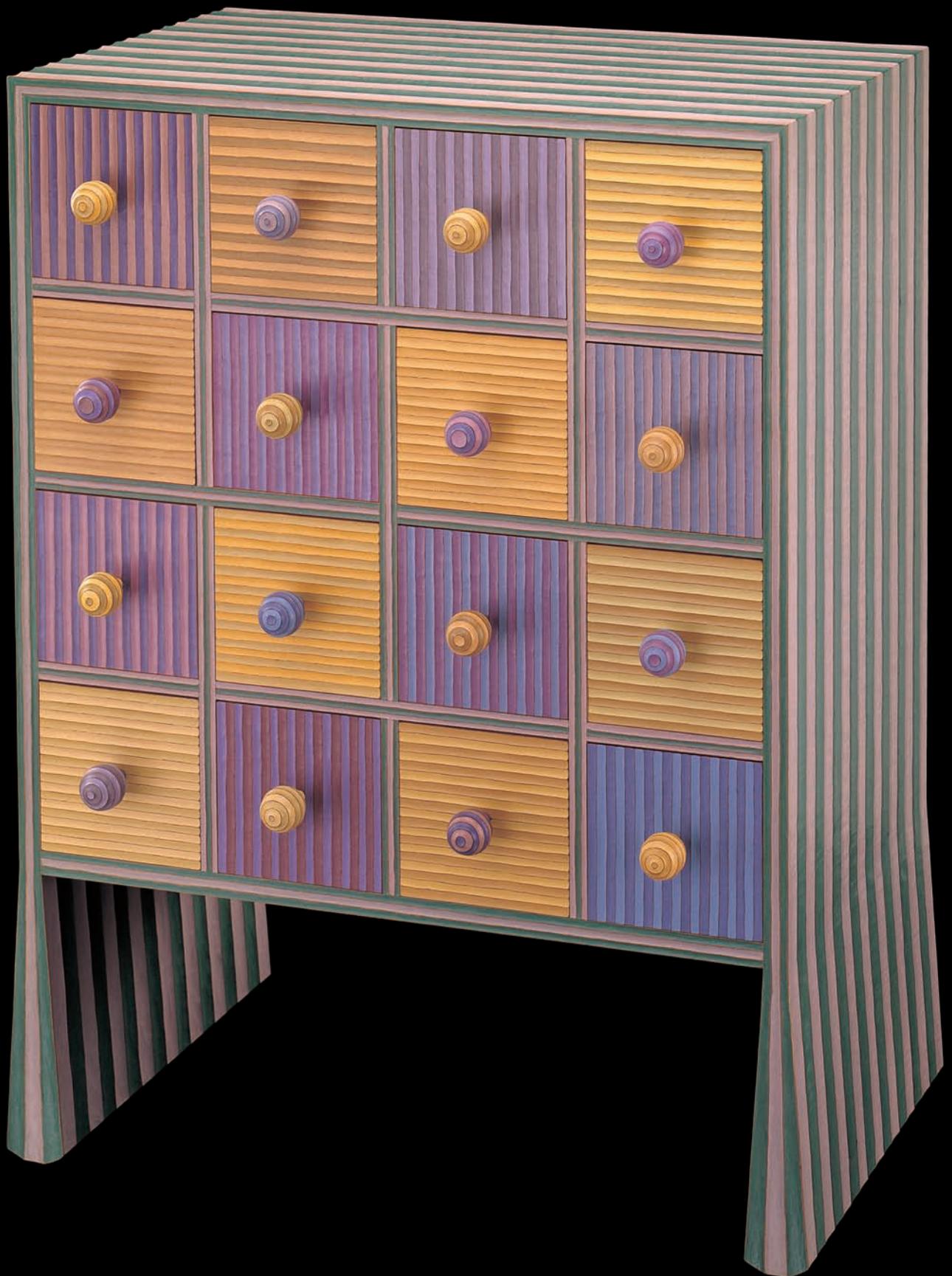
In *Four by Four*, he applied thirty-four different colors of milk paint to decorate the surface. Each drawer front received two unique colors, either from the yellow/orange family or the blue/purple

family. The finish coat was sanded with fine steel wool, both to polish the surface and to expose a little of the red mahogany on the edge of the fluting to introduce yet another color. The composition relates to Josef Albers and his ideas about working with contrasting colors. A former faculty member of the German Bauhaus, Albers taught color theory at Yale University, where he chaired the design department.

Preferring handwork to power tools when possible, Loeser used a gouge to cut the fluting on the drawer fronts but resorted to a grinder to make the larger cuts on the sides of the case. "I like painting on the thin edge," says Loeser, "and the definition that the edge then gives to the larger planar surfaces."<sup>33</sup> The drawer dividers overlap in a woven pattern to knit the piece together visually. Even more important than providing visual mass at the base, the flared feet create a critical sense of tension with the rigid checkerboard grid on the façade.

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<sup>33</sup> Cooke, *New American Furniture*, 66.



# DANIEL MACK

born 1947  
Rochester, New York

## *Eel Gig Chair*\*

1992, maple and found objects, 56 × 21 × 21. Gift of  
Frederick Wiedman Jr. in memory of Richard Mack, 1999.33

FORMERLY A JOURNALIST, DANIEL MACK TAUGHT himself to make furniture, ultimately deciding he could more effectively communicate through his furniture than through writing. The rustic tradition in furniture goes back at least to the tenth century, when the Chinese made furniture out of tree roots. It was revived in the eighteenth century to feed the appetite for the exotic and was practiced by the gypsies (Roma) in Eastern Europe and the Celts in Ireland. By the nineteenth century, rustic furniture appeared in English gardens and soon arrived in American parks. Frederick Law Olmsted installed rustic furniture in Central Park in New York City, and it was a short step from there to New Yorkers' summer camps in the Adirondacks.

The *Eel Gig Chair* is part of Mack's "Memory" series, chairs made with branches and found objects that include woodworking tools, oars, and fishing tackle. The eel gigs in this chair have an unambiguous use to stab eels, but here they are pointing up in a less threatening position. It is impossible not to recall Grant Wood's famous painting *American Gothic*, featuring the farmer with the pitchfork. The fishhook, strategically placed at the center of the back, symbolically snags the viewer. Mack lives in Warwick, New York.







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