

## Studio Furniture

When there's a meteoric rise in value in work of an artist or maker, appraisers jolt to attention. Such is the case with studio furniture maker George Nakashima whose work has steadily achieved eye-popping sums at auction throughout 2007. His success raises the visibility of this genre and also presents questions for appraisers when evaluating studio furniture as a whole. But most makers are not as famous as Nakashima and do not have his clear sales profile. It can be difficult to determine value for this type of furniture as well as identify artists and their work. This article describes traits of studio furniture and gives guidance for finding information about the makers and their market.

Studio furniture is defined by esthetics as well as method of manufacture. This type of handmade furniture reflects the expertise and artistry of its maker. The exquisite craftsmanship, specialty woods, and thoughtful designs are characteristic of a higher level of visual literacy than one usually finds in contemporary furnishings. However, some pieces can be so understated that nothing stands out at first glance. It is only upon close examination that the differences emerge. It could be the perfect joinery, the finished secondary woods, or the smooth transitions from one plane to the next that make one suddenly gasp. These subtleties can hit like a thunderclap. Unfortunately, there is no handbook of traits or styles because the essence of studio furniture lies in the individuality and personality of the maker. Nonetheless, Edward S. Cooke, Jr., The Charles F. Montgomery Professor of American Decorative Arts at Yale University, offers a definition in terms of its method of manufacture: Studio furniture is designed by the same person who fabricates it in a small workshop, either alone or with a few highly trained assistants.\*<sup>1</sup> It can be called bench-made furniture or designer-crafted furniture, but the gist is that this modern furniture can be considered functional art. These makers are informed, skilled artists whose work very often bridges categories between furniture, sculpture and fine art. Studio furniture embodies a high level of design acuity in both overall conception and detailing.

There has been a steady progression in the focus on studio furniture in recent decades. Collectors and scholars of contemporary woodworking have been rewarded by increased attention to this field in a series of museum shows, publications, conferences, and academic programs. Exhibitions at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the work of Dr. Cooke of Yale University exemplify the maturity of the field that has captured the chronology of makers, influences and output of these artists.\*<sup>2</sup> Increased momentum of interest in this subject has been particularly noteworthy in the numerous monographs on master woodworkers and publications on a variety of studio furniture topics.\*<sup>3</sup> The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art collects stellar examples of American contemporary craft, including furniture. The Furniture Society in Asheville, NC, was founded in 1997 as a non-profit organization whose mission is to advance fine contemporary studio furniture via conferences, education, exhibitions and publications ([www.furnituresociety.org](http://www.furnituresociety.org)). There are specialty galleries that focus on this genre, lead by the most prestigious one, Pritam and Eames of East Hampton, N.Y. which was established in 1981 (<http://www.pritameames.com>).

The recent flurries in the auction market center on the so-called “first generation” makers, George Nakashima (1905-1990), as well as Wharton Esherick (1887-1970), and Sam Maloof (b.1916). These self-taught woodworkers created hand-crafted, custom furniture in an era of mass-produced factory furniture when there were no galleries and few clients to support them. They were pioneers in using the medium of furniture as an expression of their own artistic visions. There is now a lively secondary market for their work as specialty galleries, collectors and curators vie for these objects. In December 2007, a Nakashima hanging cabinet sold at Bonham’s, New York for \$39,000, and a circa-1960 double pedestal desk fetched \$ 91,000 at Phillips, De Pury & Co, New York. Sollo Rago Auctions sold a 1985 coffee table by Nakashima for \$144,000 in October 2007. Nakashima had a long and productive life producing up to 400 pieces per year, which gives collectors a large body of work to chase. Wharton Esherick had fewer clients and a small workshop. Sollo Rago set a new record for the sale of work by this artist in 2006 when the Boston Museum of Fine Arts spent \$312,000 to acquire a 1920’s screen by the artist. \*4 They sold a three-legged cherry music stand by Esherick in October 2007 for \$84,000. Moderne Gallery in Philadelphia specializes in Nakashima and Esherick ([www.modernegallery.com](http://www.modernegallery.com)) but most galleries that focus on 20<sup>th</sup> century modern decorative arts follow these superstar artists and can provide guidance to an appraiser.

For living artists, value is much enhanced by successful gallery shows as well as critical acclaim from scholars and museum curators. Sam Maloof succeeds by all these measures. He has earned many honors, most notably the receipt of a MacArthur Foundation "Genius" grant in 1985, as well as recognition in 1997 by The Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute with its “Master of the Medium” award. He is the subject of two monographs that give an encyclopedic overview of his oeuvre. One of his rocking chairs was selected by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston for their publication entitled Masterpieces from the Boston Museum. He still makes and sells his own furniture and has a backlog of orders stretching many years. When one of his rocking chairs is offered at auction, expect it to fetch \$40,000 and above. In October 2007, Los Angeles Modern Auctions sold a dining table and chairs for \$144,000. His work is closely held and rarely available through dealers.

The immense talent, personal philosophies, and tenacity of the “first generation” woodworkers continues to inspire followers, but was particularly influential on the generation that came of age during the 1970s. They understood that furniture could be a vehicle for personal creativity. Academic programs expanded during this time giving first rate training in shop skills and furniture design as well as the expectation of critical discourse. Boston University’s Program in Artisanry, the course at the Rhode Island School of Design and James Krenov’s program at the College of the Redwoods’ Fine Woodworking Program were some influential college programs. There were also expanded professional courses and workshops such as those offered at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Aspen, Colorado. The website of The Furniture Society currently lists 54 educational programs in the United States and abroad.

A common characteristic of studio furniture makers is long-term, exploratory learning. These are not naïve makers. They have a grasp of the history of furniture and they stay abreast of the current work of their colleagues in the international studio furniture movement. This results in a rigorous approach to design and construction that is manifested in the sophisticated objects they create. These artists reflect curious minds as well as a deep commitment to refining skills.

Today's appraisers are most likely to encounter work of these trained woodworkers in estate and insurance appraisal assignments. Because there is no overarching style that categorizes this work, an appraiser must use connoisseurship bolstered by research to identify both the furniture and its makers. There is such a wide range of personal expression in studio furniture that it can feel as if it belongs to both fine art and decorative art at the same time. Perhaps some examples will clarify.

Below is a pair of bedside tables made by Ross Day, a graduate of the College of the Redwoods' Fine Woodworking Program. These dignified tables are quiet, cool and calm. Made of cherry with handmade rosewood pulls, you can tell the outward curving tapered legs are carefully shaped in two directions. In addition, when one moves in and looks more closely, sophisticated detailing is revealed. Note how the grain of the wood follows the shape of the legs. The artist took care that all four sides of each leg have straight grain that visually supports their curving form. This is a hallmark of Krenov-trained woodworkers who pay attention to the effect of wood grain graphics on the final design.



Above: Ross Day, Koto bedside tables, 1996, cherry with rosewood pulls, maple secondary. Private collection

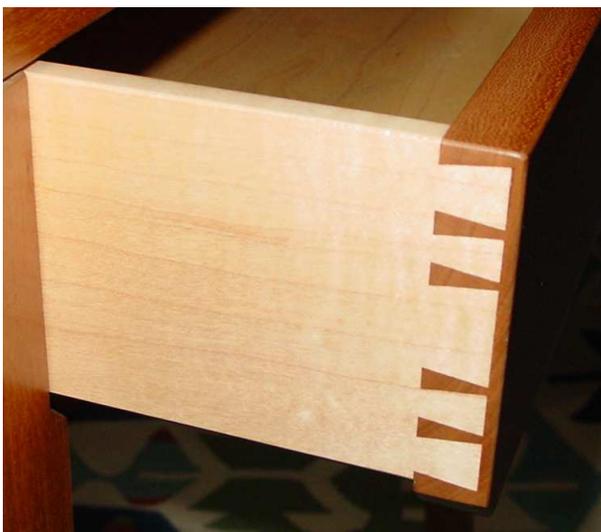
Furthermore, look at how the drawer meets the top of the leg. The short 45-degree angle lets the drawer face fit against the leg in a way that softens the intersection. The beveled reveal between the drawer face and leg casts a shadow that accents this geometry and highlights the perfect fit of each element. When opening the drawer, one finds a fully finished interior of maple and dovetail joinery that exploits the rhythmic possibilities of the light and dark woods. Ross Day's tables are beautiful in overall design but also delight with successive layers of refinement in these smallest structural parts. Such quiet beauty and dignity is a hallmark of some studio furniture.



Detail views of Ross Day, Koto bedside tables

*Above left:* Note the beveled edges on the reveal between the drawer and leg.

*Lower left:* Note how the artist exploits the graphic rhythm of the dovetails. The secondary wood is maple and the drawer is fully finished on top, bottom and sides.



A piece that illustrates another aspect of studio furniture is the work of Aaron Levine, son of a bronze figural sculptor and former student of Ross Day. His work is bold and extraverted. This is a round game table made of pear with an inlaid checkerboard in holly and wenge. Its silhouette illustrates the maker's confidence with sculptural forms. Note how the stance of the table animates the form, with its talon-like legs evoking beastly connotations. The tabletop is a tessellation of identical, laser-cut pieces of pearwood veneer. The variegated wood grain has been very carefully applied to produce a light halo around the checkerboard with slightly darker modulations beyond. This creates a light and dark mosaic texture not unlike an animal skin. Contrasted with these fanciful images are disciplined forms. The stark geometry of the checkerboard opposes the shimmering tessellations but both are contained within the wide rim of the tabletop. Overall, this table is a balanced piece of sculpture with several lively subtexts.

*Right and below:*  
Aaron Levine, Chessellation Table, 2007  
pear, holly and wenge. Collection of the artist.



A third example is provided by Brent Skidmore, Craft Campus Director, University of North Carolina in Asheville. With a MFA in sculpture, he has taught in several college programs and now leads another. His coffee table is a highly accomplished work incorporating humor, complicated forms, texture and color. The distinction between sculpture and furniture dissolves because it belongs to both categories. The sagging X-shaped stretcher is the only piece in natural wood. This hardworking element supports the glass tabletop, links both piles of boulders, and bends under the terrible weight of the polished river rocks placed on top of it. It is a humorous foil for the beautifully carved and painted basswood stones. This imaginative work skewers the laws of nature while simultaneously paying homage to them. The boulders have the polished sheen of semiprecious stones but they belong to the geology of the artist's imagination.

*Below:*

Brent Skidmore, Low Slung Boulder Table, 2005, ash, basswood, acrylic paint and glass, Private collection.



Although these three makers differ from each other, these examples are masterful in overall concept and form. Each provides pleasure in the close inspection of details, transitions and connections that unfold in a series of delightful discoveries. This applies to the technical as well as the conceptual aspects of these designs and is an important part of the definition of studio furniture.

If an appraiser is assessing a piece of studio furniture, it can be difficult to identify the maker and find comparable sales. Not all makers sign their work. When flummoxed, there are four paths to take and all are very well organized on the website of The Furniture Society (click on “collecting”). The first step is to find galleries that specialize in the genre. The Furniture Society lists 31 galleries but one should cross-reference their list with a quick Google search for “studio furniture gallery.” Once inside gallery websites, peruse artists in hopes of finding something similar to the piece that is the subject on the appraisal. However, one must confirm authorship of a piece, as valuation is tied to the maker. Be sure to augment the search by consulting publications on the subject (see footnote\*3). After finding a likely match, contact the gallery with a polite request for guidance. Studio furniture makers as a group are highly curious and very well informed as are the gallery owners who support them. They keep abreast of the field through publications, workshops, exhibitions, and conferences. It is likely they will either know the artist or the artist’s teacher which will point the appraiser in the right path. A second method for finding an artist is to attend one of the specialized shows or exhibitions that promote fine quality craft. These occur throughout the country and are a goldmine of information. The Smithsonian Craft Show and Crafts America shows are very prestigious, but all are exciting centers for showcasing the best in studio decorative arts. Their websites are enticing, but it’s best to attend the show in person to get good information. The third method for sleuthing is to check the Makers Portfolio section of The Furniture Society website. Thumbnail photos allow one to scan pieces making the search fast and efficient. These artists are eager to market their work and will most likely assist in any way that they can. And finally, when one learns the name of the woodworker, the fourth method of inquiry is the clearest and most direct: find the artist’s website and contact information. It is best to talk to the maker when assessing a piece. Learn when it was made, the materials and methods of construction, as well as its sales history. Although artists don’t always know about comparable values, they do know a lot more about their work than an appraiser can deduce on his own. As a group, studio furniture makers are very approachable and accessible, but they are individuals and it is important to respect the privacy of those who can not speak with you. All in all, most appraisers find this is a very pleasant part of the research process.

Unfortunately, the secondary market is not well established for the work of studio furniture makers who are still making pieces. Occasionally, a piece sells at auction, but the prices are erratic and unreliable as an indicator of value. If an appraiser needed to assess a piece by a living artist, a natural source would be the gallery that promotes his work. Bebe Johnson, owner of Pritam and Eames Gallery, states that part of her responsibility is to establish realistic values. She would evaluate each

piece individually and compare it to the career arc of the maker. Bryan Ohno, past director of Northwest Fine Woodworking in Seattle, outlines a diagnostic evaluation of a piece. He would compare it to current work of similar design and determine if it is typical for the artist or an experimental form. If the work had been exhibited or published that would enhance value. And finally, an assessment of its condition would be an important factor to consider. He has seen work by gallery artists offered on Craig's List or in local auction houses, but feels the secondary market is in its nascent stage. However, the gallery was established in 1980 and he predicts pieces from early buyers will begin to reappear.

Like every specialty area, success for the appraiser of studio furniture is based in research and study. Because the furniture is as individual as the maker, it can seem a bit daunting to tackle this field. It can feel as if one needs a professional guide to find the right galleries, read the relevant publications, or explain complex construction techniques. However, such are the exciting challenges of a field where artists are extremely well trained and express their personal visions in multifaceted ways.

1. The term "studio furniture" is defined most eloquently by Edward S. Cooke, Jr. in an essay that first appeared in Furniture Studio the Heart of the Functional Arts, edited by John Kelsey and Rick Mastelli, The Furniture Society, Free Union, Virginia, 1999, pp. 8-11. It is available online: <http://www.furnituresociety.org/frames/fabout/home.shtml>

2. New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers, by Edward S. Cooke, Jr., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1989. The Maker's Hand American Studio Furniture 1940-1990, Edward S. Cooke, Jr., Gerald W. R. Ward, and Kelly H. L'Ecuyer; MFA Publications, Boston, 2003.

3. A partial list of the ever-expanding list of publications focused on studio furniture, arranged chronologically:

The Impractical Cabinetmaker, by James Krenov, 1979

Worker in Wood by James Krenov, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company Inc, 1981; reprinted Sterling Publishing Company, Inc. New York, 1997.

The Soul of a Tree: A Woodworker's Reflections, by George Nakashima, Kodansha International, Ltd, 1981

Sam Maloof: Woodworker, by Sam Maloof, Kodansha International, Ltd., 1983.

Handmade in America Conversations with Fourteen Craftmasters, by Barbaralee Diamonstein, Harry N. Abrams, 1984.

A Cabinetmaker's Notebook, by James Krenov, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company Inc 1975, reprinted, 1984.

Contemporary American Woodworking, by Michael A. Stone, Gibbs M. Smith, Inc. 1986.

Furniture by Wendell Castle, by Davira S. Taragin, Edward S. Cooke, Jr, and Joseph Giovannini, Hudson Hills Press, 1989

New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers, by Edward S. Cooke, Jr., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1989.

Art for Everyday The New Craft Movement, by Patricia Conway, Crown Publishers, Inc. 1990.

Fine Craftsmanship in Wood, by Betty Norbury, Linden Publishing Company, 1990

Edward Barnsley and his Workshop Arts and Crafts in the Twentieth Century, by Annette Crruthers, White Cockade Publishing, 1992.

Makepeace A Spirit of Adventure in Craft and Design, by Jeremy Myerson, Cross River Press, 1995.

The Art of John Cederquist Reality of Illusion by Arthur C. Danto and Nancy Princethal, Oakland Museum of California, 1997.

Skilled Work American Craft in the Renwick Gallery, by Kenneth R. Trapp and Hoard Risatti, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998

Two Looks to Home The Art of Tommy Simpson, text by Tommy Simpson, introduction by Pam Koob, Little, Brown and Company, 1999.

Please Be Seated Contemporary Studio Seating Furniture, by Kari M. Main, Yale University Art Gallery, 1999.

Furniture Studio The Heart of the Functional Arts, edited by John Kelsey and Rick Mastelli, The Furniture Society, 1999.

With Wakened Hands Furniture by James Krenov and Students by James Krenov, Cambium Press and Linden Publishing, Inc, 2000.

The Furniture of Sam Maloof, by Jeremy Adamson, Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2001.

Made in Oakland The Furniture of Garry Knox Bennett, curated by Ursula Ilse-Neuman, American Craft Museum, 2001

Collecting Modern A Guide to Midcentury Studio Furniture and Ceramics, by David Rago and John Sollo, Rago Modern Auctions, 2001

Furniture Studio Tradition in Contemporary Furniture, Edited by Rick Mastelli and John Kelsey, The Furniture Society, 2001.

Contemporary Studio Case Furniture: The Inside Story, Essays by Virginia T. Boyd and Glenn Adamson, University of Wisconsin, 2002.

Scratching the Surface Art and Content in Contemporary Wood by Michael Hosaluk, Guild Publishing, 2002.

The Right Stuff A Juried Exhibition of Upholstered Furniture, The Furniture Society, 2002

The Maker's Hand American Studio Furniture 1940-1990, Edward S. Cooke, Jr., Gerald W. R. Ward, and Kelly H. L'Ecuyer; MFA Publications, Boston, 2003.

Nature Form and Spirit: The Life and Legacy of George Nakashima, by Mira Nakashima, Abrams, 2003

Wood Art Today, Furniture, Vessels, Sculpture by Dona Z. Meilach, Shiffer, 2004

Curv-iture, Studio Furniture Celebrates The Curve, The Furniture Society, 2004.

Fresh Wood Foreword: Conversations with Sam Maloof On Student Design, by Greg Asbury and Corinne Cortinas, Mitra Publishing Group, 2004

Furniture Studio: Furniture Makers Exploring Digital Technologies, edited by John Kelsey, The Furniture Society, 2005

The Penland Book of Woodworking Master Classes in Woodworking Techniques, introduction by Jean W. McLaughlin, Lark Books, Sterling Publishing Company, NY, 2006

Furniture Studio: Focus on Materials: Furniture Studio 4, edited by John Kelsey, The Furniture Society, 2006

Garry Knox Bennett Call Me Chairmaker, Chief curator, Michael Monroe, Bellevue Arts Museum, 2006

Furniture Studio: The Meaning of Craft, edited by John Kelsey, The Furniture Society, 2007

Thinking Through Crafts, by Glenn Adamson, Victoria and Albert Museum and Palgrave Publishing, 2007

4. See story about this auction by Lisa Solis-Cohen in The Maine Antique Digest, March 2007, available online at [http://maineantiquedigest.com/articles\\_archive/articles/mar07/sollorago0307.htm](http://maineantiquedigest.com/articles_archive/articles/mar07/sollorago0307.htm)

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