Refined Vernacular

The Work of Kenneth Fisher

BY EDWARD S. COOKE JR.

In the Milwaukee Art Museum's Chair Park—a "please-be-seated" collection of contemporary chairs made in a variety of historical styles—stands a rather imposing plank-seated, board-constructed chair made of elm. When I first visited this exhibition, I simply looked at the elm chair and jumped to the conclusion that this must be a stiff and extremely uncomfortable chair: the vast expanse of wood and the geometry of the planes seemed unwieldy and unforgiving. However, upon sitting down in it I found, much to my surprise, that it was extremely comfortable. The angle of the back provided perfect support, and the soft, oiled finish imparted not just a smooth burnished surface but an upholstered effect. Even without a seat cushion the elm chair was as comfortable a chair as any I had sat in. The accompanying interpretive material identifies it as a "lambing chair," a collector's term for the seating form that Bill Cotton, in his encyclopedic *The English Regional Chair*, attributes to the sheep-raising districts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, England, and dates from the mid-eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries. According to oral history, the low seat and wooden back and wings provided shelter from cold, damp drafts when pulled up to the fire in a shepherd's croft in northern England.

Amidst a Boston leather chair, a Philadelphia Chippendale chair, and even a Rietveld Berlin chair, the lambing chair is a less familiar form, one that might be simply dismissed as a folk survival. But the story of Kenneth Fisher, the chair's maker, and the development of his interpretation of the lambing chair tell a different story, one that

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KENNETH FISHER EXCEPT AS NOTED

This traditional lambing chair, built in England between 1800-1850, had a profound influence on the course of Kenneth Fisher's work.

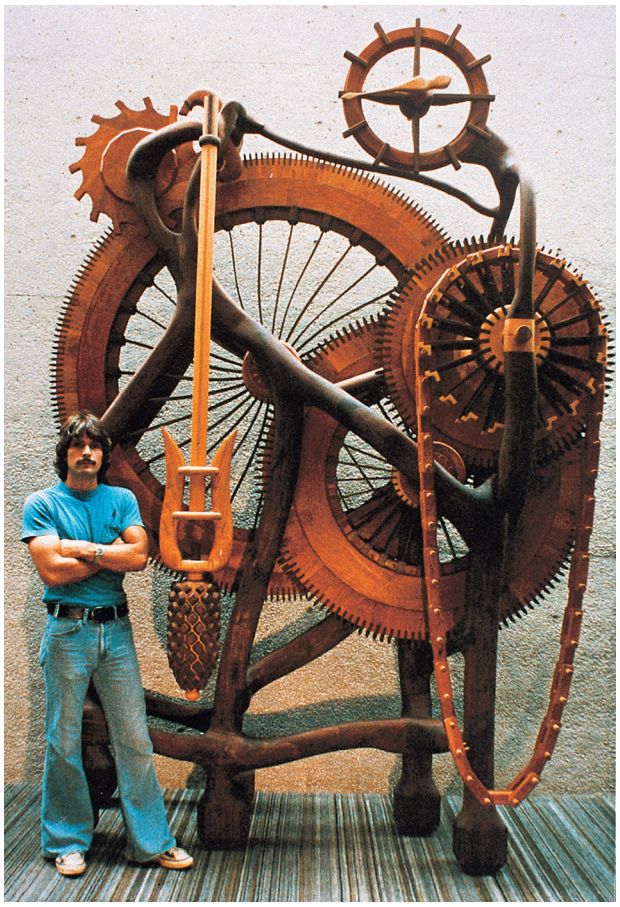


PHOTO BY LAWRENCE HUNTER

PHOTO BY JOHN McNAUGHTON

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—
Kenneth Fisher, "Time Stops for the Artist," (1975-77), Evansville, Indiana. Black walnut, black cherry, birch, sugar pine, hard maple, red oak, white oak; 144" x 96" x 48".

Lawrence Hunter, "Clock IV," (1975), San Diego, California. Black walnut; H: 86", D: 26".

John McNaughton, "The Spring Table," (1976), Evansville, Indiana. Plywood, glass; 18" x 56" x 30".

speaks more to the maturation of the studio furniture field in the last quarter of the twentieth century than to the persistence or preservation of traditional vernacular forms. The term "studio furniture" refers to one-off, high-end, custom work made in small shops, not by craftsmen who have learned their trade through apprenticeship or in industry, but rather by self-taught "alternative lifestylers" or makers trained in college programs in woodworking and furniture design.

Kenneth Fisher (b. 1950) did not descend from a family of woodworkers and internalize familial or local cabinetmaking traditions, but grew up on a farm in southwestern Indiana and entered the field of furnituremaking through academic instruction, a product of the expansion of craft and art curricula in American universities that had taken place in the 1960s. Upon his discharge from the Marine Corps in 1972, Fisher had matriculated at the University of Southern Indiana in Evansville under the GI Bill. Although he majored in Life Sciences, he also began to take sculpture classes as a sophomore. As he returned to school for his junior year, he found the art department had the use of a large new wood/metal shop and immediately enrolled in John McNaughton's class. It was a propitious moment, since the woodshop had just moved from a small space, approximately the size of a two-car garage, to a $500,000 facility with brand new equipment. It was an awe-inspiring space in which a student with dreams could really flourish.

The history of academic furniture has tended to focus on the East and West Coasts and has rarely paid much attention to the Midwestern programs. Like most other departments in the region, Southern Indiana focused upon sculptural furniture. John McNaughton, who first worked as an automobile designer and then earned an MFA in sculpture from Bowling Green, viewed himself as a woodworker/sculptor. In this approach he was linked with a generation of teachers and makers who sought to make sculptural furniture in the 1960s. Eschewing the reverence for wood, traditional joinery, and familiar functional forms that typified the work of designer-craftsmen and woodworkers of the 1950s and early 1960s, McNaughton, like Wendell Castle and Tommy Simpson, demonstrated a predilection for art furniture. He viewed furniture as a form of additive sculpture, gluing up pieces of wood and shaping the mass with hand tools and grinders to produce distinctive witty, ironical, or fantastic forms. He explained his philosophy at that time: "My work has to go beyond a nice recognizable form. It has to be an art object which makes a statement, a message with impact. Humor and whimsy play important roles.…My work has to go beyond being well-crafted and a nice table." In the latter part of the 1970s, McNaughton produced a body of whimsical illusionistic works that playfully engaged the viewer.

Fisher found the woodshop to be a comfortable and stimulating environment. His mechanical aptitude, which had served him well as a weapons repair specialist in the Marine Corps, gave him the confidence to tackle large, complex technical work, and his nascent sculptural interest emboldened him to respond to McNaughton's charge to make a wooden object that would incorporate mechanical principles. Like others in the mid-1970s, Fisher decided that the clock would offer the perfect balance of technical demand (for the works) and artistic demand (for the case).

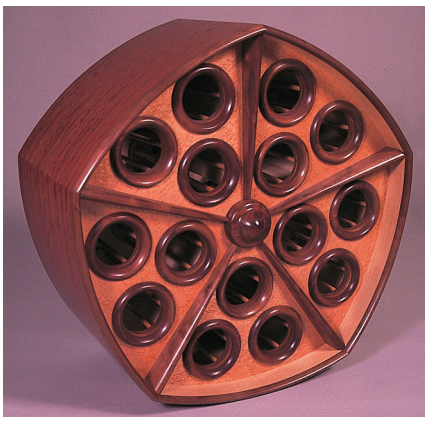
It was at this same time that Constantine's, a New York fine wood merchant, offered plans for clocks with wooden works; that John Gaughan made a skeletal grandfather's clock with wooden works; and that Larry Hunter, who taught at San Diego State, used the clock form to explore kinetic sculpture within a functional format. Hunter eschewed the older traditional adornment of the case and focused upon visible works so that people could watch time actually move. Like Hunter, Fisher sought to create a visual form that displayed every aspect of the mechanism of time, and plunged into the construction of a gigantic,

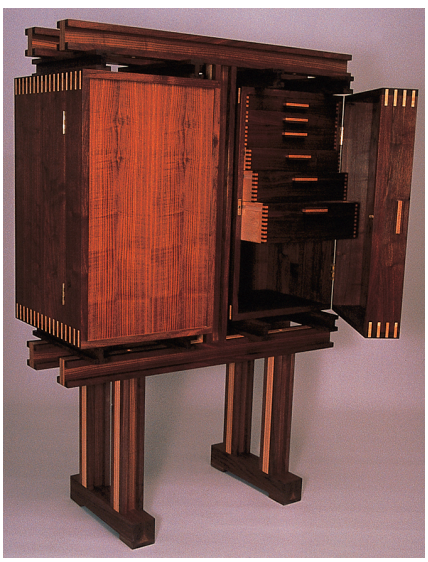
three-geared clock that took him more than 3,000 hours over two years to make. The finished clock, standing 12 feet high and 8 feet wide, weighed about 350 pounds. He used mainly black cherry, hard maple, and birch for the works, and made the frame of brick-laminated black walnut. The size of the clock and its gearing attracted considerable attention, resulting in a photograph of it and a description of its works in issue 15 of *Fine Woodworking*, the journal that became the first and most influential publication for the field of studio furniture. The image of Fisher with his clock captures the historical moment: a shaggy haired, mustachioed maker in bellbottom jeans stands proudly in front of an unprecedented piece of sculptural furniture. The clock neatly blended the two main furnituremaking philosophies of the time, the non-traditional freewheeling sculptural stance of 1960s furnituremaking and the highly refined technofetishism of the super objects that began to appear in the later 1970s.

While Fisher had aspirations for developing a career in "monumental wood sculpture," the market for such work was limited in 1978—there were a mere handful of craft or art galleries that showed furniture, few exhibitions that showcased the work, a single publication that illustrated a sufficient quantity of work, and general lack of public awareness regarding the field. All would develop over the course of the 1980s, but Fisher, like many contemporaries, found it difficult to secure any commissions to get started in the late 1970s. He was forced to take a job for a year building houses down in Gilbertsville, Kentucky, in the Kentucky Lake region. In this capacity he gained practical woodworking experience, but the lack of a shop prevented him from undertaking any of his own furniture. After a year in the construction business, he took a job in a General Electric chemical laboratory and felt resigned to a less creative career.

However, a photograph of Fisher and his clock, posted in an antique shop in New Harmony, Indiana, caught the attention of Jane Blaffer Owen, a prominent art and antique collector and philanthropist, who then asked to meet the maker. Impressed with Fisher and his work, she encouraged him to return to furnituremaking and consulted McNaughton about additional training. He recommended that Fisher apply to either Rochester Institute of Technology's School for American Craftsmen (RIT) or the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in order to develop better cabinetmaking skills. The latter accepted Fisher on the basis of the clock, and he enrolled as an undergraduate, funded by Owen, for the 1979-80 academic year. He then entered the two-year MFA program.

The two years during which Fisher was a graduate student proved to be a moment of transition in the RISD furniture program. Tage Frid, the head of the graduate program, had just finished the manuscript





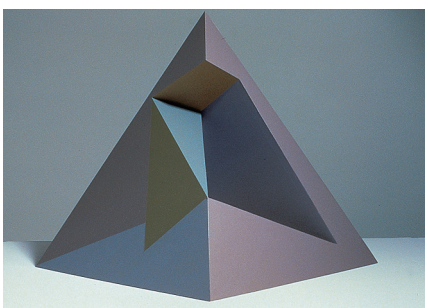


PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROL ROSEN

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—
Kenneth Fisher, model for "Budding Platform with Chairs." The actual piece, built while at RISD in 1982, measured 120" x 84" x 84".

Kenneth Fisher, "Wine rack" (1981), Providence, Rhode Island.

Kenneth Fisher, "Structural Cabinet" (1980), Providence. 64" x 45" x 19".

Carol Rosen, "Altered Spaces IX" (1987-88), Califon, New Jersey. MDF; 19½" x 24" x 24".

Kenneth Fisher, "Swamp Cabinet" (1981), Providence, Rhode Island. Walnut, maple, ash, sassafras, osage orange, ebonized oak, cherry; 72" x 52" x 16".

Side and rear view of a traditional lambing chair, English, 1800-1850, from the Owen family's collection . Plank-constructed from pine and elm, it was this design which inspired Fisher's subsequent work.

for his volume on furnituremaking techniques for Taunton Press and received a new contract that allowed him to focus on the graduate program. To teach the undergraduates, RISD hired Seth Stem, a recent graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University. Both instructors were to have a significant impact on Fisher.

Frid emphasized the need to design around construction and imparted a certain shop floor resourcefulness that would maximize the appropriate technique in an efficient, practical manner. From Stem Fisher developed a keen interest in bent lamination as a foundation of design. A table and chairs project he undertook while at RISD reveals the influence of both teachers—the chairs recall Frid's three-legged stools, while the tapered lamination of the table's legs acknowledge Stem's influence. Another invaluable experience during Fisher's RISD graduate work was a job during the summer of 1981 working for Thorp Brothers, a high-end furniture restoration shop in New York City. Exposure to historical furniture and cabinetmaking techniques expanded Fisher's horizons, and the acquisition of restoration skills diversified his career possibilities. Since there is always a need for repair and refinishing, he could always take on restoration work when he needed cash.

Fisher graduated from RISD in 1982 with the expectation of entering the mainstream of the studio furniture field. He took a teaching and residency position at Peters Valley Craftsmen in Layton, New Jersey, and received a significant Visual Arts Fellowship, awarded by the New Jersey Arts Council Grant, for 1983-84. As an award winner, he was included in two local exhibitions: a February exhibition at the Nabisco Brands Gallery in East Hanover, New Jersey and a summer exhibition at the Noyes Gallery of Art in Oceanville, New Jersey. For both local shows, he relied on work he had completed while a graduate student rather than more recent work. At the Nabisco Gallery he showed "Swamp Cabinet," "Structural Cabinet," and a wine rack. For the Noyes he showed only his "Swamp Cabinet," which Ed Sozanski, the art critic for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, referred to as "a salon piece, overdesigned and overjoined." However, such a display of technical virtuosity was typical of much of the work made in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The contrast with his earlier clock reflects the changes within the field at large. Whereas the earlier work had combined a free-form frame with an intricate clock works, Fisher's RISD body of furniture was sophisticated work in which the technical details and combination of contrasting woods became the dominant message. It was serious refined furniture more than loose sculptural furniture, and his "Swamp Cabinet" became his calling card during this period when the field privileged fussy work.

While Fisher's work fit squarely into the dominant strain of studio furniture at

this time, he apparently found it difficult to build a career as a studio furnituremaker. The Peters Valley studio was dysfunctional (the shop space was dilapidated, with no heat, and funds were lacking), and he found it difficult to make a body of work or sell anything. Looking back on this period, he recently commented "I was never unsure of my own work, but I was unsure about making money doing it. I had many ideas in my mind and as sketches in a folder. I was astounded that the work I had produced at this point was not selling. I didn't have a permanent house to keep them in, and they only became a burden to drag along with me or to find storage for." His furniture was more for show than for sale. Cash flow, or a lack thereof, thus began to influence his decisions.

He began to orient his work towards a variety of related activities in the New York City area, establishing a shop in Brooklyn in 1984: he did restoration work for Mark Hampton (another Indiana native), undertook some restoration work of his own, constructed built-in furniture according to architects' specifications, and even oversaw work on the apartments of the Owen family. From 1986 to 1988 he worked as a fabricator for the sculptor Carol Rosen, who had first met Fisher when they both exhibited at the Nabisco Brands Gallery. When Rosen began to explore clean, precise geometric forms, she realized she needed a craftsman with strong technical skills. From Rosen's cardboard and tape maquettes, Fisher constructed hollow forms of MDF, which he had cut and glued with a complex series of jigs to ensure strong, crisp edges that would not fray or soften. Rosen then took the primed forms and finished them with her own paint scheme to emphasize the different planes. Work for Rosen seems to have encouraged Fisher to appreciate simple forms and shapes without sacrificing his commitment to technical precision; his subsequent work was to be considerably less self-conscious.

While engaged in this variety of activities, Fisher encountered a charming piece of vernacular furniture owned by the Owen family—a "lambing chair," the collector's term for a boxed wing chair. The Owen's example belonged to a venerable tradition of enclosed wooden seating designed to offer protection from the drafts so common in houses from the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. Settles and wainscot chairs often faced the fireplace, with the rear board that extended to the floor and the wooden side wings or paneled enclosures underneath the arms sheltering the sitter from the cold air drawn up the chimney. Randle Holme, the late seventeenth-century English author who provided invaluable commentary on the crafts, described just such an old-style armed box chair: "Some term it a settle chaire, being so weighty that it cannot be moued from place to place, but still abidest in it owne station, hauing a kind of box or cubberet in the seate of it."

Whereas the wider settle served as a room divider and effective barrier to drafts, the chair provided more individualized comfort. Like its fashionable urban cousin, the upholstered easy chair, the boxed wing chair provided a sheltered enclosure for the aged, the infirm, or for childbearing women. Instead of expensive imported upholstery materials that a specialized craftsman, the upholsterer, laboriously nailed, stitched, and shaped, the vernacular version relied simply on the local artisan and solid wood to provide comfort. The raked angle of the back, the height of the seat, and the level and shape of the armrests provided the necessary bodily comfort. Drawers, opening to the front or the side, could be used to store chamber pots, books, or other personal possessions.

Most English examples of the boxed

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT—
"Child's rocker" (1750-1800), American. Poplar, white pine, and soft maple; 21 1/16" x 9 1/16" x 9 3/4". Yale University Art Gallery, the Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, 1930.2293.

"Chair" (1905-30), designed by Thomas Lee, made by Henry Bunnell, Westport, New York. Hemlock; 38 3/8" x 39 1/2" x 40". Yale University Art Gallery, Mr. and Mrs. Frank J. Coyle, LLB, Fund, 2002.77.1.

"Winged armchair" (1750-1850), North Lancashire, England. Pine.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

PHOTO COURTESY OF YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

PHOTO COURTESY OF YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

wing chair were the work of a joiner, who used paneled construction with mortise-and-tenoned frames to build the chair. However, the Owen's chair is a carpenter's version, in which none of the frame is joined. Rather, the boards are sawn to certain patterns (the back and sides are each comprised of several boards glued up) and then butted and nailed together. A cleat is nailed along the upper part of the outback, nails along the back edge of the sides secure the back, the rear feet are nailed to the back, and the seat is nailed into place through the side and rear boards, providing a stiffening core. The dovetailed drawers and the tenoning of the two front rails into the front legs provide the only evidence of joinery. Nailed board construction of boxed wing chairs has been found in American furniture, primarily on children's chairs, which were often fitted as close-stools with a round hole cut in the seat. The emphasis on sawing boards of straight-grained lightweight species such as pine or yellow poplar, assembling the parts with metal fasteners, and relying on the precise angles of the boards to ensure tight fit and comfort also link the Owen's example with the so-called "Westport" chairs made of hemlock during the early twentieth century in that New York town located on Lake Champlain. However, the Westport chair was intended primarily as an informal outdoors chair, usually sited on the porch, rather than an interior domestic seating form.

One of Fisher's early lambing chairs, together with a detail of the drawer construction.

Fisher was immediately intrigued by the Owen's chair when repairing it in 1983. Its commanding presence appealed to his interest in monumental sculptural furniture, its direct workmanship resonated with the principles that Tage Frid emphasized, and its historical associations tapped his developing appreciation of antique furniture. His restoration work had reoriented his perspective and made him more sympathetic to past work rather than only creating unique signature work. He therefore decided to make his own version of the lambing chair based very closely on the original. He measured the prototype, set out to copy it, and ended up making a run of 45 chairs in 1986 for the New Harmony Inn in New Harmony, Indiana, a commission that was initiated by a member of the Owen family.

For this project he used wide boards of yellow poplar (he provided an oil finish for some of the chairs, while others were painted by a local artist), screwed a cleat along the back to keep the glued-up back boards together, drove screws along the rear edge of the sides into the back board, used screws to secure the rear feet to the back boards, ran screws through the upper front rail of the front to secure the front edge of the seat within the structure, used doweled joints to assemble the front façade, nailed the drawer together, and screwed on the small armrests and handholds . He did countersink and plug most of the screws. In making this first set of chairs, he found the form much more complicated than he had originally imagined: the use of a plank seat required allowance for the wood to expand and contract within the board frame, the weight of the boards could make the final chair too heavy, and any slight variation in the compound angles would result in disaster.

After his initial foray into the vernacular form, Fisher began around 1994 to make his own refinements. Instead of using common yellow poplar, he decided to make

Selection of chairs in Kenneth Fisher's Poseyville, Indiana, shop, 2002. Besides removing the upper back cleat, he made various less visible changes in the design and construction process.

his chairs out of more figured woods such as black walnut, cherry, sassafras, and elm, and applied an oil finish that accentuated the grain and depth of the wood. Much as studio furnituremakers and turners had begun to do in the 1970s, he consciously sought richly-figured, diseased, or spalted wood to add vitality to the form. He also began to clean up and refine the appearance of the chair. To construct the front façade, he used biscuit joinery rather than dowels. Rather than fix the seat within the board perimeter, he glued corner blocks along the inside of the back and sides to reinforce joints and provide a platform on which the seat could rest. Slotted metal L-brackets attached to the corner blocks and the underside of the seat allow the seat to float, fixed to the front seat rail and expanding across the grain within the back and sides. Around 2001 he eliminated the awkward back cleat, dovetailed the drawers, and slightly enlarged the handhold, which he also tapered slightly in thickness towards the outer edge. Parlaying his experience in constructing Rosen's sharp edged sculptural forms, he began in 2002 to develop jigs that would ensure the optimal gluing and fastening of different boards that comprised the frame and sought to eliminate the need for screws. He initially developed this technique for the smaller child's versions, and has recently applied this approach to the larger versions. Instead of screwing the sides to the back and covering up the countersunk screws with plugs, he began to rely on tight glue joints. The result is a smooth, exactly faceted exterior emphasized by the warm oil finish. The oil finish and the rounded edges combine with the various angles of the planes to provide a surprisingly comfortable seat, even without a squab.

Starting in the mid-1990s, Fisher began to focus on the lambing chair as his "signature" object, just as the rocker had become Sam Maloof's. Like his historical predecessors, he has developed a number of different sizes, including baby, toddler, adolescent, and adult, although none are used in the original manner as close-stools or seats for the old or sick. Scaling the chair up or down allows him to maintain his "brand," since the shape of the crest, wings, armrests, and front skirt remains the same. In addition to the visual coherence of a family line of lambing chairs, Fisher also found that a concentration on a particular form provides flexibility in his work, as he began to work in several places: in 1996, he married a French woman and began to spend part of the year working in France. Until 2001 he split time between Brooklyn and France, but in the late summer of that year he shifted the American operation to a new shop he built in Poseyville, Indiana. His focus upon a specific form allows him to maintain production in both locales. Due to his past frustrations with galleries and in response to his peripatetic lifestyle, Fisher has turned away from traditional representation and instead sought new avenues for marketing. In order to showcase his work, explain the derivation of the term "lambing chair," and to establish a national and even international presence, he developed a website (www.lambingchair.com).

Kenneth Fisher's lambing chairs are hardly carpenter-made box chairs quickly nailed together from common woods, but rather the culmination of a life spent seeking a personal voice in the field of studio furniture. After struggling to make a living making monumental sculpture or super objects that blended highly technical carcase work with organic details, he has found the ideal format. In his chairs, he has blended the idealism of 1960s sculptural furniture, the technical orientation of the 1970s, and the informed study of historical work. Taking the philosophy of McNaughton, Frid, and the restoration world, he has developed a fresh, original voice that is not burdened by the self-consciousness of his previous oeuvre.

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