CHAPTER 4

Meet the Makers

We knew the Japanese were honouring their master craftsmen. I’d visited some of them . . . I visited the atelier of some of the most important ceramic artists in Japan. I saw the way the society acknowledged them, supported them, the way it properly attributed value to their work. And it seemed to me that all of those things needed to happen here (Wilson 2011).

In Chapter 2, “New Zealand’s Craft Organisations,” I mentioned the visit to New Zealand by Tasmanian furniture maker, Kevin Perkins. Perkins was brought to this country in 1982 as a speaker and to give workshops, the first practitioner of the medium to be invited; this occurred not long after Carin Wilson became a member of the Executive of the CCNZ. It was also mentioned that, subsequently, Perkins’ esteem as a maker was honoured in Australia in 2008 under the programme Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft.

Wilson’s quotation above refers to an effort, after the demise of the CCNZ in 1992, to inaugurate a “living treasures” programme in New Zealand. Called Nga Taonga a Hine-te-iwa-iwa or Treasures of the Goddess of Crafts, it was an unsuccessful effort that faltered due to lack of funding; there is no dedicated acknowledgement of the contribution of craftspeople to this country’s culture. The conferral of Orders and Distinguished Service Decorations in the biannual New Zealand Royal Honours System (“New Zealand Honours”) infrequently includes craftspeople: except for those who top the list, their names are typographically buried amongst those of entrepreneurs, judges, sportsmen and community activists.

Books such as Helen Schamroth’s 100 New Zealand Craft Artists identify practitioners in all media who might be selected as New Zealand treasures, were such an initiative undertaken; Schamroth highlights four within the furniture category.

In determining the selection of furniture makers to comprise my case studies for this thesis, I am, in effect, establishing my own list of living treasures within that medium. My criteria adhere to those adopted by Craft Australia: “iconic and influential crafts practitioners . . . whose exemplary craft skills have been recognised by their peers” (“Living”). In addition to heritage value, the adjectives “iconic and influential” suggest longevity in practice, thereby necessitating a selection of mature furniture makers. “Exemplary craft skills” implies practitioners who have won awards, been appointed to selection committees and whose work has appeared in peer-reviewed exhibitions. Within my designated focus, one-of-a-kind handcrafted furniture, my potential candidates must satisfy these criteria too.

I have limited myself to six practitioners because although each of New Zealand’s furniture makers is unique, it is ineffectual to belabour repetitions of similar career paths. I will examine, in depth, the careers of those six but, where pertinent information from additional makers warrants inclusion, I will identify and quote them. As indicated in Chapter 1, my case studies, in alphabetical order, are: Greg Bloomfield, Humphrey Ikin, Wendy Neale, John Shaw, Colin Slade, and Carin Wilson.

Chapter 4 is structured as a description and analysis of each case study. I have adopted a narrative approach in this chapter in line with the narrative/autoethnographical method outlined in Chapter 1. Kleinman concludes: “While coherence and analytic power count for something, so too do reflexive voice, style, thickly described ethnographic materials, and aperçus that illuminate a local world, often in order to challenge a putative universal . . .” (194-195). More recently Wolcott argued “the ideal unit of study for any ethnographic inquiry is one of something” (Wolcott 92). In the case of this thesis ‘one’ is the individual narrative of each studio furniture maker.

Unless noted otherwise, quotations appearing in this chapter come from practitioner interviews. Each of the six practitioners has read and approved the publication of his or her section. The Ethics Approval form and information sheet appear in Appendix 10.

Cliff Whiting, a Māori carver, was named to the Order of New Zealand in 1998; Doreen Blumhardt, a potter and educator, was named to the Order in 2007 (“New Zealand Honours”). Humphrey Ikin, David Trubridge, Carin Wilson and Marc Zuckerman. Schamroth also identifies Megan Huffadine as making furniture but Huffadine sees herself as a mixed media sculptor who uses domestic forms (Huffadine).
The criteria for conferral of “living treasure” may vary among list-makers. One analyst might choose to categorise furniture makers typologically according to material—wood, metal, plastic: this method is usual for general craft anthologies (Blumhardt and Brake; Cochrane Smart; Strecker). Another analyst might select style—traditional, primitive, modern, conceptual (Risatti); a third might select generation (Cooke). My choice follows from the discussion developed during Chapter 1, namely the holistic and the biographical. I posed the questions: who, amongst the 100+ identified furniture makers (Appendix 11), has contributed significantly to their community, both micro and macro, and in what ways has that contribution been made?

After investigating and interviewing a range of makers, the chosen participants represent contributions that were essential to the burgeoning of the medium in New Zealand during the period 1979 to 2008. These contributions spring from the nature and nurture of the makers. Much as I did for myself in Chapter 1, I explore the demographics of my selected case studies. My observations and analysis have been synthesised into labels that, to me, represent the respective significance of each maker and their key role in the craft community. Arranging the labels in alphabetical order, they are: the advocate, the native, the outsider, the teacher, the woman, and the writer. The chapter describes each of the practitioners who fall under these designations.

The Advocate: Carin Wilson

Figure 118. New Zealand Coat of Arms (designed 1956)
The New Zealand coat of arms, adopted in 1911 and revised in 1956, identifies New Zealand as a bicultural country. The figures stand in the same plane, metaphorically indicative of the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding constitutional document. The symbols on the central shield represent New Zealand's trade, agriculture and industry. The fern is a popular symbol of nationhood, and the crown a reminder that the country is a constitutional monarchy. This coat of arms is still in use today.

The New Zealand coat of arms (Figure 118) attests to the dual nature of the country's culture. On the left a European woman stands for the Pākehā (non-Māori New Zealander) segment of society whose ancestors came to the South Pacific in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seeking seals, whales, timber, gold and territory; on the right a Māori rangatira (chieftain) represents the indigenous inhabitants whose land and coastal waters contained what was sought after. Carin Wilson (Figure 119), embraces both heritages: his maternal grandparents were Italian, and his paternal grandfather, a Scot named Andrew Wilson, married a Māori, Anahera Kingi. This lineage influenced his furniture career.

Carin was born and raised in the South Island and although, during his school days, he was “fascinated to learn about what went on in the art class,” he never got there. His facility with academic subjects led him to study law at Victoria University of Wellington in 1965 at the age of 20. Boredom curtailed his legal studies and he found employment as a sales representative for a Māori publishing company, during which he trained in organisation and methods. Following the de rigueur New Zealand OE, ‘Overseas Experience,’ he returned to his birthplace, Christchurch.

5 Risatti’s A Theory of Craft is not an anthology of makers but he discusses style within craft and categorises several chairs according to style (229-231). It is interesting to note that Risatti nominates John Dunnigan, one of my former instructors at the Rhode Island School of Design, as “contemporary Studio Craft style” whereas Edward Cooke ‘lists’ him as “second-generation studio furnituremaker.”

6 Wilson’s hapū or tribe is Ngai Te Rangihouhiri (CV).
Furniture-making began out of necessity. In the early 1970s, with his wife Jenney, he purchased a small run-down cottage in the Heathcote Valley near Christchurch and made furniture for it out of old kauri (*Agathis australis*) tubs that he found on his property. This inclination could be said to have sprung from his Pākehā roots because, as Wilson explains, furniture was not a traditional Māori practice:

There’s no real history of furniture for the Māori culture. As far as I can tell the creative work was all developed around the location of tangata, that is the man, in the tribal milieu. So tangata, the individual, fits into the whānau [extended family], hapū [sub-tribe], iwi [tribe] continuum, and the primary form of expression is to be found in the architecture of the marae [meeting house complex]. So the work of the designers of the Māori culture, the indigenous culture, the tohunga whakairo [master carver], and tohunga raranga [master weaver], that’s really all concerned with how the body of the individual fits into the body of the whole. And the body of the whole is represented in the wharenui or the meeting house. And interesting, I think, is that the evolution of furniture as a form has not really evolved in that context. As far as I can tell, the headrest is about as far as we went. There’s a little bit of furniture from further afield, like within Polynesia, so there’s the throne seat of the Cook Islands and there are headrests throughout the Pacific . . . we lived on the floor, we lived on our beautifully woven mats and much of what might have developed into furnishings in the western world is concentrated around the presentation of food. So the food bowls and the storage receptacles and so on, that’s really where most of the effort and design work went (2009).

This awareness of Māori traditional artistic concentration on the tapu (sacred) meeting house (Figure 120) came later in Wilson’s life. At the time of refashioning the discarded kauri, he was supporting a growing family and furnishing its basic needs. However, he describes a moment during his early making that had a profound effect on his subsequent life and career, one that had “strong inner meaning”:

![Figure 119. Carin Wilson, 2005](image)

Wilson, shown working in his Auckland studio, maintains a hands-on practice that varies from functional furniture to sculpture using a range of materials.

![Figure 120. Waitangi Meeting House](image)

In celebration of the centenary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1940, the Whare Runanga was built at Waitangi on the premises of the original Treaty House. In 1989 the building was restored by means of removal of the interior to expose the original 1833 structure (Department of Conservation). Intended as a meeting place for all Māori tribes, the carvings, painted rafters and tukutuku panels represent the various iwi throughout New Zealand.
One day I found an old gate under a hedge and I started cleaning back the timber underneath the weathering. And had quite a transforming experience. As I peeled back those layers I saw something in the timber that I can only describe as its spiritual essence. So it was in every way a transforming experience for me. I'd made that connection with the wairua [spirit] of the timber and from then on I knew that I'd found a material that I connected with at a deep level. And that's really the beginning. I started a process of learning the characteristics of the timber, of reading and teaching myself methods that I could use to work it (Personal 2009).

Wilson recognised the soul of the wood and a personal connection to it. Māori carvers acknowledge that carving has “physical, metaphysical and spiritual realms of understanding” (Toia and Couper 42); Walker quotes a karakia (chant) that precedes the felling of a tree to propitiate the gods for taking a resource (R. Walker 213-214); and Skinner identifies a ‘truth to materials’ philosophy that pervaded Māori Modernism, whereby the grain, knots and vagaries of each piece of wood determine the outcome (Grant and Skinner 147). Yet Wilson's epiphany was not yet steeped in this carving tikanga (lore) but was, for him, about finding truth in materials. Wilson's consciousness of the mana (integrity) of the material provoked his total immersion in the craft of woodwork in the European tradition. His engagement was all-encompassing: “I could work 18, 20 hours a day and not feel at all fatigued, coping with the physical demands of running a family and generating a viable income from this work. All seemed to be carried along with the sheer joy of being able to practice something that had such a strong inner meaning for me (2009).”

Risatti describes timelessness in this way: involvement with a material—wood—with the intention of producing a functional object—furniture—can immerse the maker in an imaginative state that expands the possible outcomes (202). Imagination, a dream-like condition, is often beyond control and, therefore, beyond the dictates of real time. Wilson's sensation of timelessness, verified by many people engaged in pleasurable activity, is called “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi Flow). Flow is defined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (4). Further in his book he describes the metaphysical nature of flow: “Flow helps to integrate the self because in that state of deep concentration consciousness is unusually well ordered. Thoughts, intentions, feelings, and all the senses are focused on the same goal... And when the flow episode is over, one feels more ‘together’ than before, not only internally but also with respect to other people and to the world in general” (41). Risatti, as a craft theorist, adds further to the notion of an imaginative or out-of-body dimension to creative work. He differentiates craftsmanship from workmanship and design by citing Greek antecedents: “it [craft] is theōría and praxis coming together as poësis, as a creative, form-giving act of the imagination” (202). He hereby broadens the scope of holistic craft, identified in Chapter 1, to a tripartite activity of theory, practice and invention.

In conjunction with his self-teaching, Wilson began to seek out the company of other craftspeople and artists. Noel Gregg, a blacksmith who established a group of studios in the early 1970s in central Christchurch called the Artists Quarter, encouraged Wilson’s aesthetic and techniques (Figure 121), prompting his continuing exploration and refinement. Wilson determined that the way to become recognised was by means of exhibitions and made a commitment to make 15 pieces in six weeks to fill an unexpected vacancy in the Canterbury Building Centre's exhibition schedule. While sitting in the space on the exhibition's first day, he was approached by a man who, after wandering amongst the textured occasional tables, shelf units and cupboards, inquired about prices. Wilson hastily calculated costs, and when he named a figure, his questioner, a buyer for the McKenzie & Willis furniture retailer, wrote a cheque for the entire lot and gave instructions for delivery to the store when the exhibit closed. As Wilson says, “It was a dream start.”

For the next five years Wilson and, later, two employees, producing under the label Adzmarc (Figure 122), supplied McKenzie & Willis with all they could make. The confidence and stability engendered by that relationship prompted Wilson to expand his creative network, both in the Artists Quarter and beyond. He was a founding member of the Canterbury Guild of Woodworkers and was
proposed as Southern Regional Representative on the Executive of the Crafts Council. In 1982, in addition to fulfilling his duties as President of the CCNZ, he moved his family to Auckland to be closer to his Māori roots in Whakatane.

Wilson's desire for closer association with heritage coincided with his growing awareness of the potential of his furniture-making. Relocation to Auckland, New Zealand's largest commercial city and manufacturing and service centre, permitted association with a community that was design-focused—in contrast to the Artists Quarter that was craft-focused—and an opportunity to compete in that commercial environment. Connections made with Auckland artists such as John Parker (ceramics) and Terry Stringer (sculpture) provided a network of exhibition opportunities, and once a studio was established in Mount Eden, he continued to be a prolific and accomplished furniture maker.

One of Wilson's major commissions (Figure 123a) was for the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council headquarters in Wellington. In 1985 nine furniture makers7 were invited to submit designs for three projects: a boardroom table and sixteen chairs, furniture for the Director's office, and furniture for the reception area and offices. After a two-stage selection process, Wilson was awarded the boardroom project; Roland Seibertz was awarded the other two. The brief for the table stated that it must be multi-purpose, accommodating both small and large meetings. The complementary chairs (Figure 123b) were a refinement of a set of chairs commissioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs as New Zealand's gift to the new Republic of Vanuatu (Shanahan 87). Wilson credited Harriet Lukens and Jim Hoogemeen as his assistants, and his family for their tolerance as the completed components took up more and more space in their home (Mulvay 16). The latter attests to the constraints and problem-solving faced by the solo furniture maker.

Despite these accomplishments, Wilson has been criticised for his making amongst some

7 Remi Couriard, Lee Elliott, Humphrey Ikin, Michael Penck, Roland Seibertz, John Shaw, Carin Wilson, Mark Yetton, and Marc Zuckerman.
Criticism arose out of Wilson’s condoning of alternative forms of furniture: his instigation of the Artiture furniture exhibitions in 1987, and his piece for the Contemporary Furniture Show at the Auckland Museum in 1988. In response to the latter display, as previously noted, he had exhorted his fellow practitioners, “[f]orget the method and tie it together with string if that works for you” (Wilson “But” 14). It is relevant to re-view these exhibits with a different lens in order to make the argument for Carin Wilson as advocate.

Furniture Advocate

As has been previously outlined, Wilson was the first woodworker on the Executive of the CCNZ, thereby bringing the interests of woodworkers and furniture makers to the table. He was also the first of two CCNZ Presidents who were furniture makers, possessing a perspective that took account of this relatively new medium in the New Zealand craft range. And given that Wilson was attempting to make a living as a furniture maker, he identified with moves toward professionalisation of the crafts, including aspirations that quality handmade work command an appropriate financial return. He became a strong

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8 In a conversation in March 2008, David Haig and Marc Zuckerman claimed that Wilson did not produce “quality products” (Haig and Zuckerman).

9 Footnote 10, Chapter 3, notes that the inclusion of furniture-making, as a craft practice, was debated by the World Crafts Council, New Zealand chapter in 1970; first mention of a furniture maker amongst WCC members was in 1971. Whereas Wilson is the first recorded Māori furniture maker, thereby making furniture a new medium for Māori craftsmen, historical research is needed to assess whether Māori were trained in colonial New Zealand and subsequently established their own furniture workshops.
advocate for craft furniture as a recognised professional occupation.

Wilson’s personality played a role in his being an advocate. He is a gregarious, charismatic, friendly man. He came from a professional family that guided him into the law profession and although he rejected law because it was “dry and lifeless” (CV), he presented himself, during his years at the CCNZ, in what can be described as a legal or corporate mode. He spoke articulately and was well-versed in the language and practices of other craft media. This knowledge was deliberately acquired, beginning in the Artists Quarter:

I really wanted to understand the work and I learnt a huge amount from being able to associate with those other artists. I learnt about the eye of the ceramic artist, for example, who’s throwing on the wheel and whose eye for symmetry and really good form is what sets a great ceramic artist apart from one who’s just an also-ran. I learnt from the weavers about texture and the way they work their fibre and I guess the way they engage with it in the same way that I felt I was engaged with wood as my own chosen material (2009).

Wilson’s youth, enthusiasm, and curiosity suited him well to take on the public role of advocacy. Yet there was another kind of advocacy, within New Zealand furniture-making, that was largely unexplored by orthodox practitioners. With James Krenov and Alan Peters as their most influential teachers, most makers produced traditional designs of good quality. Very few ventured into conceptual furniture, a genre that can be seen in the work of Americans John Cederquist, Tommy Simpson, Stephen Whittlesey and Edward Zucca (Figure 124). However, almost from the beginning, Carin Wilson produced work in the conceptual arena.

The first example, Burr Totara Box (Figure 125), appeared on the cover of Crafts Council News in October 1981. Box is a lidded rectangular receptacle with prominent finger joints—its form as a functional container and construction are traditional. But, from there on, the object is about concept or story. Box is carved to create the impression that it is a battered wrapped parcel. Trompe l’œil flaps of ‘paper’ fold over the ends and a corner appears mashed, as if the box has been dropped; the grain of the totara gives a semblance of wear and use. The box is held closed by a length of rope, and Wilson’s notes (“Notes”) state that the rope was dipped in resin and tied around the solid form to set. The entire box was
then cut open to make the interior accessible. Totara Box suggests Wendell Castle's trompe l'oeil carving from the late 1970s (Figure 126), and Wilson knew of Castle because he scheduled a visit to the Castle Workshop during his trip to the United States in 1982.

When I saw the image of Box during my early research I was struck by its unusualness in the New Zealand context and its presence, relatively early, amongst the works of a practitioner who was self-taught. Exploration of concept or content would normally take place in an art school environment, and Wilson was not art educated. I learned later that, in lieu of art school, Wilson spent two and a half years overseas where he attested to the accumulation of countless visual memories (Christian 20). Trompe l'oeil may well have been one of them. Regardless of the origin of the inspiration for Burr Totara Box, it is about chest—a furniture form that has existed for millennia—and parcels wrapped in brown paper that hold mystery, anticipation, secrets, and the ordinary. For the readers of the Crafts Council News, however, Box simply coincided with Wilson's inaugural message as President. Totara Box was not seen for what it represented—craft as conceptual. While his colleagues were pragmatic and took an anti-intellectual approach to craft, Wilson engaged in ideas, which placed him beyond the pale.10

Seven years later, Royal Pain in the Arse Chair (Figure 127) made its debut at the first Artiture exhibition. Wilson exhibited three chairs—all three manifested the same form as the chairs for Vanuatu and the QEII Arts Council boardroom table. As mentioned previously, a designer/maker will reiterate a design to maximise the research and development in the first rendition. Ergonomically, in the case of chairs, a success in terms of comfort warrants repetition. Royal Pain was displayed at Artiture along with its mates, but instead of a sensuous red or black hand-stitched leather seat and back (Cameron), it was repulsive. The back is shattered and the seat consists of laminated timber stalagmites whose location produces sensations quite the opposite of luxurious comfort. The contrast between the finely finished

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10 I intend this expression in its original meaning of beyond the palings or outside the fence (“Pale”).
frame and legs and the jagged seat is audaciously jarring. The chair makes allusions to several ideas: monarchy and, by extension, ‘the Crown’ as the New Zealand government is known (as seen in Figure 118); inertia; and the repetitiveness of ‘mass-produced’ objects, in this instance handcrafted chairs. And, coincidentally, the Oxford English Dictionary (“Pain”) attributes the first use of “royal pain in the ass” to J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye, a book that was read as avidly in New Zealand as in America. With Royal Pain, Wilson crossed the line from furniture into sculpture and function into conceptual art.

Wilson’s submission for the Contemporary Furniture Show was Lair for a Lounge Lizard (Figure 128). The image of Wilson, sitting in his creation, would have riled his contemporaries in the woodworking community because it seemed to be another of his jokes. Wilson, dressed as a corporate executive, sits in a Lancia car seat surrounded by the accoutrements of a modern office: telephone, books, a family photograph, keepsakes and a beverage. The judge for the Contemporary Furniture Show rejected Lair and it was shown at the salon des refusés. The piece may have been eliminated, fairly, because of unacceptable standards of construction and finish,11 yet this conceptual work was being compared to “safe” (Wilson “But”) recognisable forms and techniques.

During our 2011 interview Wilson explained his motivation for Lair. While attending the Milan Furniture Fair in 1988 he viewed an experimental exhibit mounted by the School of Anthropology at the University of Rome. Entitled Telematic Ulysses,12 it explored the relevance of the mythological in the march of technological progress and predicted the consequences of that momentum on our future.
working world. Wilson returned to New Zealand “gripped” by this idea and began a number of furniture pieces that reflected the theme. One of them was *Lair for a Lounge Lizard*: “what *Telematic Ulysses* had left me with was that to function successfully as human beings in the modern world we only needed this little two by two space and we already had the technology available that enabled us to work in that way. That seemed to me to suggest tremendous freedom.” Freedom, for Wilson, meant not only freedom from the usual trappings of the office, a circumstance that has since been fulfilled globally, but freedom from the ‘rules’ of furniture-making. In publicity for *Artiture*’s second exhibit, Wilson put it this way: “The ultimate achievement would surely be to shift the [way] people think about what furniture is” (“What’s On” 21). He wanted the audience to see furniture as function and ideas.

Wilson’s advocacy of conceptual furniture-making was not embraced by his colleagues. When the craft education model was abandoned in favour of teaching visual arts, a student who chose to specialise in furniture in an art school—for example, Lindsay Marks (Figure 129)—was in a better environment to explore conceptual ideas. Kazu Nakagawa who trained in furniture-making in Japan and was employed by Wilson for a year not long after his emigration to New Zealand in 1986, has explored conceptual furniture in his sculpture (Figure 130). But the development of New Zealand studio furniture along the functional/conceptual continuum did not happen. Carin Wilson is to be credited for advocating this potential.

![Image](129. Lindsay Marks, 12 Second Chair Disassembly, 2006-2007 (left). American oak, jarrah, various veneers. Marks’ chair, shown in ShowRoom at Objectspace, comes apart to be hung as a unit on the wall. He said “I love the idea of people buying it because they want that wall thing, they don’t want that furniture thing” (Marks). He has done a series of similar pieces, inspired by Shaker furniture, intended for inhabitants of small spaces: to change a room or accommodate a temporarily redundant item of furniture, it is stored as wall sculpture. Marks has an MFA from Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland.)

![Image](130. Kazu Nakagawa, A Suite: The Similarity of Seeing and Being Seen, 1997. Wood, canvas, plaster, clay (82 x 170 x 25 cm). Although Nakagawa made functional furniture during his early career in New Zealand, he gradually moved into the sculptural realm and is known primarily as a sculptor and installation artist in a variety of media. In *A Suite* he uses recognisable furniture forms to consider the concept of the self in relation to others. Stephen Whittlesey’s *Table for Two* in Figure 124 deals with the same idea. Nakagawa’s craftsmanship is not compromised in this sculptural work: the *Framed* catalogue shows a close-up of a chair joint in *A Suite* that is of the same standard as that in a ‘real’ chair.)

**Education Advocate**

Wilson’s role as an education advocate has already been extensively outlined in Chapter 3. To briefly recap, his own inability to find suitable polytechnic classes fuelled his drive, from the onset of his time on the CCNZ Executive, to rectify the dearth of craft education. Norman Creighton, an Australian keynote speaker at the 1980 CCNZ Conference, admonished delegates to settle for nothing less than the establishment of a craft programme enhanced by skilled overseas instructors (Wilson “‘That’” 4). This message spurred Jenny Patrick, Wilson’s predecessor as President, to visit several tertiary institutions already providing such art or craft education, and write a discussion paper about the potential of a craft
diploma. During Wilson’s presidency, the Vocational Training Council/CCNZ survey of craft practitioners was also published in 1982 (page 56).

In that same year Wilson undertook his fact-finding trip to 11 overseas educational institutions. On his return he wrote *A Report on Training Programmes in the Crafts at some Leading Craft Schools in Europe & U.S.A. with some Recommendations that should be considered for New Zealand.* A Report is a comprehensive analysis, based on personal observation and the brochures accumulated on the trip, in which each school is summarised under the topics of Background, Philosophy, Facilities, Pre-entry, Course Structure, and Tuition/Fees. By undertaking this exercise Wilson was able to write comparative summaries and advocate the programmes that could best be facilitated here. Concerning the Royal College of Art, London, he wrote: “I believe that every country needs its Royal College, and if we can’t afford our own we should be sending exceptional students there”; his summation of the Rochester Institute of Technology included: “Although the facilities are highly impressive and the college has its pedigree, it lacked the ‘heart’ of some of the other programmes”; and for the College of the Redwoods, he stated: “This is possibly a forerunner of a new type of woodworking instruction: that which can provide advanced instruction to those who cannot afford to be away from their own work commitments [sic] for years, but who need the exposure to some advance training that will extend their horizons. In a market where the standards are very high, this one would be my choice because its results are so visible after what is essentially a short period of instruction.”

In his “Recommendations” that concluded *A Report* Wilson proposed a committee that would act in conjunction with the Department of Education. This came to pass: between 1984 and 1986, Wilson convened the Advisory Council to the Director General of Education. While he regarded Bill Renwick, the Director General, as a “visionary,” the Advisory Council’s efforts were thwarted by the “dyed-in-the-wool inflexible” educational establishment. Wilson described the challenge:

... what some of the educators told us at that time was it takes fourteen times repeating for a message to be heard and fourteen times more for it to be understood. And that is just so true. We learned that we had to go and talk and talk and talk our heads off to a large number of people before that critical mass of support for those changes in creative education in this area were finally understood for what seemed perfectly obvious to us. But I remember also that we made substantial compromises along the way. What was ultimately introduced into the system was not the same as what we'd originally proposed (2011, my italics).

Whereas craftspeople knew what was needed with respect to education for a professional career in crafts, education bureaucrats had little knowledge or, for that matter, care about what craft practice entailed. Yet these public servants made the recommendations that were acted upon. As Wilson noted, some of their exhortations were heard but the crafts sector had to make compromises in order to get at least some curriculum in place. Without a deep-seated commitment to craft as a cultural resource, instead of a revenue earner (page 60), the complementary commitment of financial resources did not happen.

It is noteworthy that when the tertiary programmes were summarised two years after their inception, the Department of Education’s spokesperson, Dr Ray Thorburn, made no mention of the substantial lobbying by the CCNZ and allied groups. Thirteen meetings in November and December 1984, attended by CCNZ representatives, as the initiatives that launched the programmes. He credited the CCNZ, polytechnic tutors and administrators, and craftspeople with “cooperation and dedication” (Thorburn “Vocational” 3). He stated: “Carin Wilson and Campbell Hegan, both past Presidents of the Crafts Council deserve special mention” for playing roles in “plotting direction” but Wilson’s report was not cited. The Department of Education was depicted by Thorburn as the champion

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13 Wilson provided me with his annotated draft which became *Realising the Potential: A Report for the Minister for the Arts proposing a Strategy for Tertiary Education Programmes in New Zealand Craft*.

14 “Some groups, like Details representing the interests of the craft jewellers, held their own meetings and started to pull together their own outlines for training” (Wilson “‘That” 5).
of “a new generation of craftspeople who can produce forms of the highest aesthetic quality with cultural integrity, equal to anything beyond our shores” (4). This statement implied that the New Zealand Government, with the Department of Education as its agent, embraced the same belief. Yet New Zealand does not revere craft as, for example, Finland does, nor has it implemented the kind of measures that would result in non-Māori craft “of the highest aesthetic quality with cultural integrity.”

The Labour government’s egalitarian efforts to spread craft education from Whangarei to Southland stretched minimal resources—financial, premises, equipment, and, most importantly, qualified teaching personnel—and the programmes faltered. The Crafts Council had to lobby to ensure that the initial intake of Craft Design Certificate students could proceed to second year (page 62), and then the advanced two-year Diploma was funded at only four polytechnics. Concurrently, education was restructured so that polytechnics were independent of Government and by 1991 emphasis had shifted from craft to visual arts instruction. The education establishment’s lack of long-term vision for craft, per se, meant that a new generation of craftspeople could not develop. Wilson’s recommendation of a single elite institution was not a politically expedient solution; twenty-five years down the road he still believes it was the superior model.

As for teaching itself, in addition to workshops, Wilson’s roles have been advisory, mentorship and master/apprenticeship ones. He was artist-in-residence at Gippsland School of Art in Australia in 1986 and at Nelson Polytechnic in 1997. Residencies give artists the opportunity to explore ideas or develop work while being supplied with such benefits as a studio, accommodation and a stipend, depending on the sponsoring institution. Many residencies also require the maker to be available to students for observation, consultation, critiques and even lessons; at the very least students are put in touch with a professional mentor. When asked whether he maintains educational aspirations for New Zealand youth, Wilson replied:

I’m actually quite concerned for the world that we’re now leading them into. In terms of our own responsibility as kaitiaki [guardians] of the world we hand on, I feel a certain sense of failure that [there are] questions that there’s an urgent need to address now. I had those questions in my mind when I first started my life as an artist and maker and we knew thirty years ago that they were going to become highly significant and yet this preoccupation, if I can call it that, with the art process is one that maybe distracted us from addressing those questions more vigorously. I mean, honestly, I don’t really know whether it would have been possible to make more noise—when you’re talking about things happening at a planetary level, the contribution of single individuals is kind of minuscule (2009).

Craft Advocate

Wilson benefitted from the organisational and methods training he received during the 1960s. He subsequently managed several design companies, including Backhouse Interiors and De De Ce Design, both of which were furniture importers. Wilson intended that this experience be a bridge between his studio practice and industry, instilling craft principles into manufacturing. He articulated these principles, which reiterate previously-discussed (page 100-102) shortcomings in the furniture industry and government initiatives about design (page 136):

... ongoing design development was core to the manufacturing process, whereas most NZ companies saw it as an optional extra and chose to concentrate effort in achieving efficiency in production; product from NZ would only gain traction in international markets if it was successfully differentiated; adding value to our considerable output of wood as a raw material would need to become a strategic objective and accepted as a long-term commitment [sic] to a cycle of incremental improvement, ultimately contributing to our economic development” (Wilson “Re: Article”).

Ultimately, the message did not get through, with the result that New Zealand’s furniture manufacturing
industry has been in decline since the mid 1990s.\footnote{15}

Wilson served on a number of boards: the Executive Board of the World Crafts Council (1984-87), the Designers Institute of New Zealand (Council member 1991-93; President 1994), the QEI Arts Council’s Arts Marketing Working Party (1991-92), the New Zealand Qualifications Authority’s Craft Advisory Panel (1992), and the New Zealand Craft Resource Trust (1997). Bodies like the Arts Marketing Board of Aotearoa (AMBA), Nga Taonga a Hine-te-iwa-iwa\footnote{16} and the Craft Resource Trust (Figure 131) were established to address the vacuum that was left by the dissolution of the national craft organisation. I wondered about Wilson’s participation in these initiatives, given that AMBA, for example, was put in place as a substitute for the CCNZ. Had Wilson changed his loyalties; did he approve of the Arts Council’s actions in engineering (page 69-71) the Crafts Council’s dissolution? The answer was an emphatic “no.” Wilson explained that those involved wanted to “amplify the climate” by ensuring an adequate presence for the work of craftspeople in order that they could survive. His response to the question of whether the CCNZ warranted elimination was a reminder that New Zealand has not moved on from attitudes that prevailed during implementation of the earlier craft programmes:

> I think we had something that still had quite a long way to go . . . it just seems incredible, really, that here in 2011 we can talk about a government which through the Helen Clark years had sort of dabbled in the need for design. It comes and goes in waves. But we never really get down to a comprehensive commitment to it. We don’t really support it in the way that it needs to be supported to achieve the sort of change that at another level, like about performance of our economy, is being talked about constantly. But the means and the investment in it is not understood now, as it wasn’t understood in 1992. As a nation we’ve dabbled in quite a flighty way with propositions about the importance of research and development which is essentially creativity . . . but I don’t see that we’ve ever made that comprehensive commitment to it. And I’m really sorry that we haven’t and I was disappointed when that happened with the Crafts Council. But I think that there were things going on in the Council at that time that weren’t helping it to go on to become what it could’ve been . . . . You get periods in organisations which, as a society we’ve got to learn to live with, and we’ve got to wrestle with what we need to do to get them back on track. You don’t shut them down like that. It was crazy (2011).

\footnote{15} Statistics supplied by the Furniture Association of New Zealand in November 2009 show a decline in “Enterprise Units” between 2000 and 2009 of 1802 to 1568. Decline in employment over the same period was from 8490 to 6450 which represents 24% of the industry workforce (New Zealand Furniture).

\footnote{16} With the enactment of the Māori Language Act of 1987, Māori became an official language of New Zealand. Signage is often in both official languages and Māori are permitted to conduct certain legal proceedings in their own language. Aotearoa (meaning Land of the Long White Cloud) is substituted for, or combined with, New Zealand as the country’s name.

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Figure 131. Carin Wilson, He Nehenehe (A Forest), 1994. Pinus radiata, leather (85 x 55 cm)

This photo appeared on the back cover of the brochure that launched Nga Taonga a Hine-te-iwa-iwa. It was subsequently part of the virtual gallery of the same name, in which artists in all craft media displayed and marketed their work. The site remains on the web but has been inactive since 2005.
Carin Wilson remains committed to crafts. However, his move to Auckland in 1982 and immersion in Māoritanga, including learning te reo (the Māori language), led to a gradual shift in focus. He was one of the instigators of an initiative that grew out of a perceived need by the Māori community to foster not only Māori designers and makers but the continuum of creative practices within the tribal structure and community as a whole. Even its name Ngā Aho (weft) attests to the holism of the enterprise. The first hui (meeting) was held in July 2007 (Te Kanawa), and after some teething problems, the group is now healthy as evidenced by an updated website (Ngā Aho) and contracts to produce merchandise for the Rugby World Cup. Ngā Aho’s members are “Māori design professionals,” with a few non-Māori who must be nominated as Kaupapa Whānau, extended family interested in Māori ideology (Ngā Aho “Kaitautoko”).

Wilson says that Ngā Aho represents the pendulum’s swing the other way, relative to his immersion in the Pākehā-centric Crafts Council. He recalls an incident from the early 1980s:

Talk around that time of raranga [weaving] and tukutuku [woven panels], they were words that were almost not in colloquial use. And I remember so clearly, it was hugely impactful on me but also I was very embarrassed about it. I remember asking Cliff Whiting [esteemed Māori carver and former Kaihautū of Te Papa] to come and talk with my Executive at the Crafts Council about the possibility of gaining a better understanding of the work of Māori artists in our field. And at lunch time, Cliff looked completely bewildered and said to me, “Look, I just don’t know how I can make any contribution to this meeting.” Here we have a prominent Māori artist and he’s finding it difficult to connect with other craft practitioners equally dedicated in their own way, but at that time we just hadn’t been able to find a common ground. That’s not so now. Lyonel can sit in the midst of these guys and we all know what we’re talking about and I think that’s a great thing that as a society we’ve crossed a kind of bridge and it’s wonderful that we’ve made that progress (2009).

Progress is due to advocacy, both critical and affirmative of the status quo, by individuals like Carin Wilson. He continues this commitment, albeit with diplomacy: “A wise person is one who’s able to pick the opportunities to say what needs to be said and have it make a useful impact and I guess what...
I’m trying to do with my time now is pick those opportunities wisely.” There were times in Wilson’s career when he said what had to be said; there were times when he could have walked away in order to concentrate on his own practice (Figure 132). But he stayed close to the policymakers to repeat what had to be said as many times as necessary. Wilson’s commitment was to craft in all media and its place within New Zealand’s cultural context.

As evidenced in his quotation about wisdom, Wilson’s advocacy required Schön’s “reflection-in-action.” Wilson’s inclusion in this thesis is because he is, first of all, a studio furniture maker. I return to his furniture to conclude. He provided a description of his experience in making Nga Taonga o Tanemahuta and it also exemplifies Schön’s term:

I worked out a scale for the top to marry with the dimensions of the legs but as I started working up the leaf pattern I found I didn’t have enough wormy puriri. Ok, don’t panic, take a break, make a cup of tea, figure out how to deal with this. There were really only two options: abandon the puriri and use something else, or take a different approach and make the top a composition in timbers. The first one I turned to was matai and was instantly rewarded, I didn’t look any further. In fact I thought this gave me an even better result than if I had continued down the earlier track and the timbers had all been the same (Re: image1”).

The manifestations of reflection-in-action will be fully explored in the following case study devoted to Humphrey Ikin, and apply to all the practitioners in this chapter.

The Native: Humphrey Ikin

“Native” has definitions as both a noun and an adjective: “a person born in the place or country indicated; an original or indigenous inhabitant of a region”; “inborn or innate rather than acquired; belonging to a locality or country by birth, production, or growth; related to one as, or in connection with, the place of one’s birth or origin; simple, natural, free from affectation” (“Native”). My choice of this label for Humphrey Ikin encompasses all of these definitions. Ikin was born in New Zealand and has inhabited the Auckland region, the most Polynesian of New Zealand’s major centres, most of his life. He is therefore indigenous as well as being of the larger geographical region of the South Pacific known as Oceania. His heritage is European but his work attests to an innate Polynesian sensibility that, as the definition says, has a connection to its place of origin. By examining Ikin’s biography and oeuvre I intend to show that his contributions to the furniture community fall under the label ‘native.’

Figure 133a. Humphrey Ikin, 2011

Figure 133b. Cover of Interior Architecture, Issue 29, 1991

In the foreground is Ikin’s Serving Table; in the background is Rangitoto Island, a prominent feature of the Auckland harbour. The slight upward curve on the table and other works by Ikin is reminiscent of Japanese tori.
Native – Belonging to Country

Humphrey Ikin (Figure 133a) is the most distinguished of New Zealand's one-of-a-kind furniture makers. He has come closest to being named a ‘treasure’ with the conferral of the title “Laureate” by the Arts Foundation of New Zealand in 2003 (“Laureates”). The Foundation, a private group of patrons, has various funding categories—the Laureate Awards, given annually, carry the sum of NZ$40,000 and are for artists “with a proven track record.” Ikin was also the first furniture maker to receive the John Britten Design Award in 2001 from the Designers’ Institute of New Zealand. His recognition as a designer extends beyond the national: a special 1991 edition of the Australian magazine *Interior Architecture* featured New Zealand furniture with an unusual photo of Ikin on the cover (Figure 133b); and in 1998 he was included amongst the world’s top 40 designers by *I.D. Magazine*, published in New York. Despite this acclaim, Ikin is relatively unknown except within design circles.

His stature as *éminence grise* is due to personality: Ikin is self-effacing, introspective and even introverted. (My choice of the latter word is according to Carl Jung’s designation of introversion as interest directed inward [J. Hall]). Ikin’s inward focus is manifested in work that originates within and for himself, as opposed to that which is directed by and to the market; and since his self is defined by and committed to place, New Zealand is an aspect of the inwardness. Ikin speaks about how his personality is wedded to his intent:

To be honest, I've never sold a lot of work offshore. Lots of exceptions, of course, but it's not been, it was never a focus. I remain to this day interested in the people who take an interest in my work and generally that communication is a New Zealander to New Zealander thing, to the extent that I find it quite unsatisfying when you do a project for someone based offshore. You don’t meet, you don’t fully understand the context, you pack it up and send it off—especially the older you get, the less satisfying that is. That personal connection is quite important (2009).

Ikin was born in 1957 in Lower Hutt, a satellite city of Wellington. He grew up in suburban Auckland and “had an early interest in working with wood, through Māori carving at primary school which was fostered by a particularly influential teacher.” Later, in intermediate school, he was “thoroughly put off by the way anything to do with woodwork was taught and never gave it another thought in terms of a professional interest.” He completed a Business Studies degree at Massey University in Palmerston North in 1977 and then travelled to the United Kingdom. There, he says, “I must have seen some furniture that just moved me and thought, I could do that, and quite simply I put myself in a situation where I could start doing that.” He made a few items in other people’s facilities in Britain and then returned to Auckland where he set up a workshop in Pakiri (coastal rural north Auckland) and spent a year making furniture.

His awareness of his limited knowledge and limited resources prompted Ikin to return to university and he spent a year at the School of Architecture at the University of Auckland in 1981, but “most of that time I was just getting more and more sidetracked by furniture. It just became obvious that that’s what I really wanted to do. Of course you learn a lot just by being there and my interest in architecture never went away. It’s just the emphasis on furniture was stronger.” He responded to furniture’s immediacy and

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19 The Arts Foundation also has an Icon Award that honours senior New Zealand artists for life-long achievements as leaders in their fields. Icon Awards are limited to a maximum of 20 living artists. Three craftspeople were former Icon holders: Diggeress Rangitutahi Te Kanawa (weaver 1920-2009), Len Castle (potter 1924-2011) and Pakariki Harrison (carver 1928-2008) (Arts).
20 David Trubridge received the award in 2007. John Britten was a New Zealand designer renowned for his record-breaking motorcycles. Britten’s biography lauds his typifying the iconic Kiwi character who can make anything with limited resources (“Biography of John”).
21 The list is annual but the 1998 rendition aimed to broaden the usual American bias (Pearlman). Portfolios were solicited from *I.D.*’s international network of design colleagues and Ikin’s was chosen from the hundreds submitted.
22 At the time of Ikin’s *I.D. Magazine* recognition, Yvonne Martin wrote in the *The Dominion* that Ikin was not known in New Zealand like Philippe Starck, Alberto Alessi and Rei Kawakubo—“some of the others on the prestigious list” —were known in France, Italy and Japan respectively. She elaborated: “Softly-spoken, Ikin, like his work, lacks the flashy kind of ostentation that forces people to sit up and take notice.”
23 All Ikin interview quotations are 2009 unless specified otherwise.
noted wryly that, unlike architecture, it doesn’t need a building permit (“Chair”). Like Carin Wilson, he attempted to find appropriate training and made inquiries about the programme at the Royal College of Art in London. But costs were prohibitive so, in addition to learning by doing, Ikin immersed himself in the available woodworking books. He shared space at Parnell Workshops with a variety of artisans—“it was a good environment to get started”—but had another goal: “I also had this vision, which everyone has, of having my own space and being able to control my work environment . . . so I worked towards that over the first couple of years.”

As was mentioned in the Chapter 3 (page 90), one of the authors that made an impression on Ikin was James Krenov. His interest in acquiring knowledge coincided with the fruitful years of visits to New Zealand by overseas woodworking instructors. He attended workshops given by Krenov in 1983, Alan Peters in 1984, and Art Carpenter in 1986 (Ikin Index Application). His commitment to furniture-making was consolidated by his establishment, in 1984, of a purpose-built studio adjacent to his home in Mount Eden (Figure 134) from which he continued his solo practice for twenty-five years. He spoke about the advantages, and disadvantages, of the arrangement:

It was fantastic when you’ve got young children growing up. When I look back now it was a dream time, being able to work from home—you make concessions for that—not enough space—but it was terrific from a family point of view. And, yeah, I knew that was the trade-off. Always envied people who rented a large warehouse or something, but I didn’t envy their overheads. It was keeping the overheads low. That was so important to just keeping going, and I achieved that by working from home. And the three spaces just worked, separating out those functions. But it did get pretty hard. I did some quite big projects. Nine-metre objects in a nine-metre space and things like that, so you had to get quite good at doing things by stages.

Commissions constituted the bulk of Ikin’s work—an application for the Index of New Zealand Craftworkers in 1986 estimated a breakdown of 80% commissions, and 20% exhibition work (Ikin Index Application). Production included dining tables, coffee tables, chairs and storage. His earliest exhibition contributions were to an Invitational Exhibition of Woodwork in 1983 at Compendium Gallery in Devonport, Auckland, and, later that year, the Auckland Woodworkers Guild’s inaugural exhibition. Ikin was instrumental in the establishment of that Guild and was elected President.

The Guild was especially active in the early 1980s. Ikin stated that the importance of the Guild lay in the knowledge that “you weren’t alone with this passion.” He described the bond:

It was the passion about the material, that’s what drove us on at that time. I was always careful not to overindulge in the material. I had an underlying interest in design right the

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24 “I ended up with three spaces which together comprised my working world, which were the main workshop space and machinery area, separate office which I built some years later, and then another separate quite large dry storage area.”
way through and there was always this tension within the group probably around design. But that was overcome by general interests that were shared in terms of materials, and learning more about the material, and where you could get it, and equipment, and all that sort of thing.

Later in the decade “general interests” were not seen as sufficient to address the concerns of some of the members who started out in the nationwide guilds, and the Association of Designers & Furniture Makers of New Zealand was formed. Ikin was one of its instigators (page 97).

He was not entirely without aspirations for a posting overseas. In 1988, with his wife and daughters, Ikin spent a year in Italy and the United Kingdom. His motivation was partly research—“I realised there was a wider world out there, that it had been ten years or so that I’d had my head down in New Zealand”—and partly job hunting. He visited factories and studio makers and did work in borrowed premises. Yet he is magnanimous about the outcome: “I was never able to pull off the dream job over there, through a combination of lack of language and the right passport, that sort of thing, but was fairly relaxed about that. I did spend time with various manufacturers and made acquaintances and just found it really interesting. As travel always does, it widens your vision again.”

The New Zealand to which the Ikins returned was a country in which the results of de-regulation, beginning in 1984, were starting to be seriously felt. The protection that New Zealand manufacturing, including the furniture industry, had enjoyed due to import licensing, subsidies and tariffs were gradually quashed (Hunter) so that prospective buyers no longer chose the more expensive locally-made products. By the late 1980s studio furniture makers could not rely on the domestic sales that had made solo production viable. However Ikin “never worried too much about those things,” and he continued to obtain commissions including a project for the City Gallery in Wellington in which he supplied all the gallery furniture (Figure 135)—benches, display cases—when the gallery relocated to Civic Square in 1993. His work for the City Gallery also garnered an invitation for a solo show (Ikin’s exhibition portfolio will be described in the next section).

As noted in this chapter’s introduction, a Living Treasure is officially acknowledged as influential. One whose legacy is native-ness would require engagement with community and pro-activity in its evolving character. In 1985 Ikin was the CCNZ’s woodworking nominee to the Lopdell House Seminar on Craft Education and also a consultant on the woodworkers panel for the QEI Arts Council’s ‘Loans to

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Figure 135. Humphrey Ikin, Benches for City Gallery, Wellington. Tawa
The benches, with their gentle concavity, look like they belong in a woodshed or dairy barn instead of a centre-city art gallery. Their rustic no-nonsense aesthetic is rural rather than cosmopolitan and thereby reflects the New Zealand design heritage for which Ikin expresses an affinity. The creosote-like colour on the bench edges and legs emphasises the utilitarian theme and draws attention to the sitting surface. Neat rows of counter-sunk screws create surface pattern. Ikin would not intend that these pieces be regarded as precious: they are to be used. Referring to all his furniture, Ikin stated: “That’s what they’re all about, to be used and abused and become part of the long life of people who have them” (Martin).

25 In 1980, City Gallery was established as the country’s first significant non-collecting exhibition-based public gallery. It is supported primarily by Wellington City Council (City Gallery).
Craftspeople’ scheme\(^{26}\) (Ikin Index Selection). Additionally, his community engagement included teaching. Early in his career he was a part-time woodcraft instructor at Michael Park Rudolf Steiner School; *The New Zealand Woodworker* also records his teaching a two-day workshop\(^{27}\) at the Otago Polytechnic in Dunedin in 1988 (King “Education”). The most significant academic investment began in the mid-1990s when he taught studio, part-time, in the faculty of Design and Visual Arts at Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland. In the latter part of his ten-year tenure he conducted his own elective furniture paper and its value continues to be felt: “I had some very good students over those years and still have contact with quite a number of them.”

While maintaining his connection with Unitec as an adjunct professor (2002-2004) but relinquishing his teaching duties, Ikin decided to complete his Bachelor of Architecture. Part-time studies, alongside his regular furniture-making, led to his graduation with honours in 2005. This revisiting of his earlier inclination was correctly timed:

> I think from the age I am now I can relate to the lifecycle of a building more easily than I could when I was twenty. And you understand how the process takes years not days and weeks, like furniture, and that’s okay now. So at this stage I’m doing both furniture and architecture. I always thought I couldn’t survive without being in the workshop all day every day but I’ve learnt now I can. So my work involves shuffling between the two things.

His architectural aesthetic is native. In a 1999 article about cultural identity and design, Ikin said: “I like the lightweight touch that has characterised New Zealand building in the past” (Pearson 36). He identified wool and dairy sheds as being important elements of his country’s built heritage: “When they’re placed well, I like the way they fit on the land, the way they’re detailed and the colour. Red oxide on corrugated iron is very New Zealand” (36). The ‘lightweight touch’ and attention to colour will be seen as characteristic of his furniture as well.

Ikin now spends two-thirds of his time at his architectural practice and one-third making furniture and sculpture. The architectural projects are primarily large commercial buildings, in deliberate contrast to the domestic scale of his furniture craftsmanship. There is a difference, too, in the Ikin family’s living arrangements. They sold the Mount Eden property, a “good place that had had 25 years’ worth of love and attention,” and invested their energies in two properties such that dwelling and studio are no longer adjacent. Ikin’s new base is on the Kaipara Harbour, north of Auckland, from which he explores the next stage in his nativity.

**Native – Related to One’s Place**

In my days as a graduate student we were encouraged to view artists’ retrospectives. Exposure to a number of retrospectives—or a number of good retrospectives—convinced me of their merits. They show the evolution of an artist’s work and how some seeds, planted in the initial years, developed; they show the revisitation of themes and the countless hours of revision, refinement and revolution invested in those themes; and they show that the incremental art or craft process is essential to the bestowal of accolades. In other words, success is the result of hard work: “The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise” (Gladwell 39-40). Humphrey Ikin described this process as “the chronology of how life works, the reason for why your work’s the way it is.” A historical analysis, or retrospective, of Ikin’s work reveals how closely it is associated with Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Writers—and there has been considerable writing about Ikin (Lloyd Jenkins; Miles)—have interpreted Ikin’s work as having a South Pacific aesthetic. Is this an imposed evaluation or is what we see fully intended? My analysis begins with his words:

\(^{26}\) An initiative whereby the Arts Council offered loans to craftspeople for the purchase of equipment and building new facilities. The interest rate for the loans was 17.5% which the Arts Council stated was 12.5% less than the current rate (“Low-interest”).

\(^{27}\) The course prospectus stated: Day 1 focussed on design, with slides, discussion and furniture sketching; Day 2 offered demonstrations of joint laminations and manual shaping. Use of machinery assisted and complemented hand processes. Dialogue about furniture-making as a livelihood was anticipated (Crafts Council Gallery).
I think I can just summarise it by saying I am a New Zealander, I was born in New Zealand. I responded to the wider world of the Pacific, the South Pacific before the northern hemisphere, and the work I did reflected who I was and where I lived and the influences that I absorbed in the environment I'd experienced. That covers my work, it's as simple as that. Still does.

The first major publication of Ikin's work in *New Zealand Crafts* (Kennedy) highlighted pieces from the *Shop Window* (Figure 136) exhibit at The Potters' Arms in Mount Eden. Shop Window, as its name implies, was a small space and Ikin treated it “like a little stage” where several pieces of a similar type spoke to each other. A convex curve was a common element for the chair and several tables, and Ikin told Kennedy how he arrived at the shapes: “The ‘weight’ given to the tops in terms of visual thickness and radius of curve is crucial to the success of these pieces. I finalised the shape by drawing and re-drawing directly onto the surface of the plank before committing it to the bandsaw” (Kennedy 29). This description of a direct relationship between the material and the designer exemplifies Schön's notion of “reflection-in-action” (54-55). Rather than dogged adherence to a preconceived outcome, the maker is facilitator of a ‘dialogue’ between the timber, woodworking technique and creative outcomes. Influences are part of this dialogue and Ikin listed some at the time of *Shop Window*: Italian design of the mid-1980s, several (un-named) English and American furniture makers, Egyptian furniture, James Krenov, New Zealand-made furniture from the 1950s and 60s, and the Auckland Museum’s He Taonga Māori/ Māori Court. However, the presence of any of these influences is simply part of an accrual of experience that comes to bear, along with theory and practice, on creative endeavour.

In late 1985 Ikin received $6,000 from the QEII Arts Council to create work for a solo exhibition at Compendium. It represented two New Zealand firsts—no furniture maker had previously been given public support to undertake a solo show, nor had a furniture maker tackled the solo task of creating work to fill an entire gallery (Queen Elizabeth New). Ikin had about six months during which he made 18 pieces that were described by Vic Matthews as being of consistently high quality and excellent craftsmanship (Matthews “New” 16). Matthews, an accomplished maker himself, commended the technique of Ikin’s work: “what a joy to see the undersides of tables finished as well as the tops, buttons neatly made and spaced, everything slot-screwed where it should be to allow for timber movement, screws headed neatly, brass butt hinges buffed and polished, solid drawer bottoms with neat, elegant slips, etc.” As the senior craftsman—Matthews was 48 and Ikin 29—Matthews felt that he might question a few of the design decisions but was confident that Ikin had considered each element carefully. The article delighted in describing craftsmanship and left aesthetic judgments to *Touch Wood*’s readers by

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28 The Potters’ Arms, a workshop and retail outlet was opened in 1979 by Peter Lange and two friends. It survived for nine years and, according to Lange’s website “became a cultural, social and political meeting place.”
The Compendium exhibition showed more investigation of the chair form (Figure 137a). The case goods, while heavy in terms of mass, iterated the lightness of the earlier dining tables in that they ‘floated’ above the floor. The tables (Figure 137b) betrayed the influence of Alan Peters in their simplicity and reliance on the beauty of well-crafted straight-forward materials. There was evident attention to the juxtaposition of timbers, and joints were honestly expressed where appropriate. Ikin contended that this exhibition was about its origin in New Zealand but added: “I do not, however, set out consciously to utilise so-called Pacific imagery, but over a period of time we all build up a bank of sources of inspiration and, due to exposure, the Pacific (Polynesia and Japan) has strongly influenced my work” (“Craftsman” 148-149).

Seen in the context of retrospective, the Compendium exhibition represents the maker’s coming to terms with his craft—manipulation of materials, techniques, forms and design—to demonstrate increasing mastery. Room, however, a solo show at the Dowse Museum in Lower Hutt in 1994, again assisted by the Arts Council, diverged from the strictly functional into facility with poetic license. The contrast between Spring and Stave chairs (Figure 138) and the lounge chair from the previous exhibition is marked. The idea for Stave Chair originated with a charred barrel stave and saw several refinements in

Matthews justified his approach: “In making any criticism of a piece of furniture, I always recollect Alan Peters putting forward the view that one should start from the base of the correct use of material, and appropriate and accurate craftsmanship. Only after a piece satisfies those criteria, should one start looking at function and aesthetics” (17). In Matthews’ article, a minimal foray into aesthetics was: “An almost mediaeval form had been brought right up-to-date in a very individual way” (17).
form over the coming years. Ikin stated that no blueprints (“Chair”) were created in advance, and that design and making were integral, resulting in a finished piece whose effort does not show. Stave Chair has become one of Ikin’s signature pieces.

As a whole, Room was envisaged as an installation (Figure 139) in which the relationship between the objects was as significant as the objects themselves (Schamroth “Humphrey”). Functional items were grouped around a large dining table: materials, forms and details were in conversation like actors in a play. Sculpture also played a role, and has continued to be a significant proportion of Ikin’s output.

From Lower Hutt, Room went to the RKS (Rodney Kirk Smith) Gallery in Auckland; Ikin was pleased with the feedback from both installations: “people responded to it, just fantastic response to those exhibitions.” He went on to emphasise the value of exhibitions:

I always saw the exhibitions as being very important and part of your job, really, as a furniture designer and maker, to speak to a wider audience and that’s what those public galleries do so well. They’re much, much more important than any commercial commission, really. As important as commissions might be to the viability of your practice, the exhibitions, for me, were always at the centre of the work in terms of what really mattered.

Ikin’s point warrants expansion. Commitment to an exhibition is a major undertaking. Some of its components include: application for a grant; negotiations with a gallery; making the work; anticipation of adequate financial resources while making the work; manufacture of shipping containers; arrangement of transportation; oversight of installation with gallery personnel; attendance at the opening and, possibly,

30 Ikin elaborated on the extent of his drawing: “Something that you’re doing as a speculative piece, as an exhibition piece, can sometimes be very little. Though the gestation might be long, you might have doodled a bit and thought about it. If, on the other hand, it’s a commission where something has to be thoroughly documented, you will do a lot of work prior. Quite often drawing is done afterwards to record. Some things you do a lot of drawing on paper before you do your making and other things might be sparked by the material or by a logical progression that you’ve become well aware of when doing the predecessor, so there’s not much in the way of drawing required. I think thinking is always more important than drawing.”

31 Ikin used this analogy when describing his intention for the earlier installation Shop Window.

32 Ikin’s request of $8,000 for the Compendium show was reduced to $6,000 (Queen Elizabeth New), a meagre sum on which to survive, as well as buy materials, during months when commission income could not be earned.
gallery talks; oversight of the return of the work to your premises or its next venue; a repetition of the same routine if the exhibit is re-mounted; storage of the work at exhibit’s end. For a solo practitioner, this is daunting and many eschew the prospect. But exhibitions are vital to a medium’s recognition and while they are not overtly didactic, they inform. Humphrey’s Ikin’s ten solo exhibitions and participation in many group shows contributed to the presence and health of New Zealand studio furniture during the 1980s and 1990s.

Ikin expressed his personal motivation for including exhibitions in his repertoire: “Any commissioned work comes with lots of constraints and it’s not really enough to provide you with opportunities for the fullest development. Exhibition work is wholly your own and there are more opportunities to take ideals further and more opportunities for decent promotion . . .” (Queen Elizabeth New). A skilled craftsperson can produce an object ‘on demand’—that is, fulfil a commission—but exploration of his or her concepts requires another outlet. An idea is ephemeral until it is manifest in material: sometimes an idea, when realised, is found wanting and rejected; sometimes an idea evolves through various iterations (Figure 140a and 140b) before the (holistic) maker is satisfied. Public display permits receipt of feedback from peers, critics and the public, and the creative loop continues as the maker takes more ideas back to the studio.

Schön described this as the “action-present” (62). This time zone can be minutes at the table saw while cutting legs for a table—instantaneous decisions must be made—or the months that surround preparation for, staging of and feedback from an exhibition. Design and production of client-specific pieces do not permit long-term exploration of material and process: financial support by an outside source affords the practitioner this kind of reflection-in-action. Ikin was fortunate to receive such support on two occasions from the QEII Arts Council and the development of his aesthetic was a result of this ‘luxury.’ Of the case studies in this thesis, only Greg Bloomfield also received funding to mount a solo exhibition.

Ikin also noted above that he welcomes the “decent promotion” that comes from exhibitions. As a professional practitioner he has to be cognisant of the means by which he maintains his career, and publicity helps. I would also contend that Ikin’s personal exposure raised the profile of his and others’ studio furniture as a visible consumer choice. His participation in the establishment of the Furniture Group, the aims of which included raising public awareness, shows his magnanimity and astuteness in
extending his mana to the community as a whole.

**Facing North** is Ikin’s most important large-scale solo show (Figure 141) to date. As mentioned earlier it took place at City Gallery in Wellington (2 August to 28 September 1997), following on from a commission for that institution, and had a second venue at the Auckland Museum (7 March to 10 May 1998). The remarkable feature of this collection was its colour: black and red pieces stood alongside natural wood-toned ones, and several types of metal—copper, aluminium and steel—were incorporated as contrasting surfaces. Application of paint complemented the texture of the timber grain: at times, in Ikin’s portfolio, the wood is smooth and at others it has been roughened with a wire brush or rasp. *Red Stave Chair* (Figure 141), compared to its predecessor in *Room*, lost its elemental qualities and demanded placement in an up-market inner city loft. Stainless-steel screws, sitting proud of the wood surface, secured as well as adorned this fashionable object.

The reviewers of the exhibition, architectural critics Paul Walker and Justine Clark, interpreted the meaning of the title. Not only were all the objects oriented in a northerly direction, they faced Auckland (when shown in Wellington) which, the reviewers noted, has a more tropical climate and can dispense with the warmth of upholstery. They also faced the world ‘up there’—Japan, North America, Europe—the regions to which New Zealand is beholden, with its export-focused economy. I would add that Ikin’s furniture in *Facing North* was a statement that New Zealand, instead of being ‘down under,’ was ready to face down its competition. My view is that Ikin was not saying that this represented a typical antipodean style but rather that, as the essence of one New Zealander, it could stand international scrutiny. The range of forms, mastery of materials, sureness of aesthetic, and underlying presence of a consistent design ethos in *Facing North* were evidence of Ikin’s stature as a designer/maker. *Facing North* was the height, to date, of Humphrey Ikin’s exhibition career in terms of studio furniture.

This section was devoted to a retrospective, chronological development of Ikin’s work. As viewers, we looked back, from this point in time, and reflected on a body of work. Donald Schön points out that the reflective practitioner is engaged in this effort at every point in time: “He does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision which he must later convert to action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his inquiry” (68). Each action encapsulates what has gone before, and the acquisition of additional knowledge is brought to bear on the simultaneity of being a designer/maker.
The seamlessness of thinking and doing coincides with another aspect of native: “inborn or innate rather than acquired.” While Ikin’s knowledge and skills were not inborn, they certainly became second-nature as his career progressed. He is now at the stage of “unconscious supercompetence,”*33 where body and mind know innately what is required to fulfill a task. This circumstance is known to everyone who is a master of a skill, in all walks of life. For master craftspeople, the skills within their medium become native.

Yet the maker also benefits from consciously stepping out of practice on occasion to conduct an overall reflection. Ikin described his dedication to keeping an up-to-date photographic record. The

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*33 W.S. Howell identified the following learning transitions: unconscious incompetence (ignorance of lack of knowledge), conscious incompetence (awareness of ignorance but not equipped to deal with it), conscious competence (awareness plus knowledge to problem-solve), unconscious competence (ability to act without having to think about it), and unconscious supercompetence (effortless action) (Howell quoted in Morell et al.).
existence of that record permits him retrospection and to re-view the past as a means to go forward:

After I’d been working professionally for five years, say, or ten years, I would compare my back catalogue with architects of the same age, who had worked a similar length of time. It was so satisfying, the ability to mark your progress with furniture—you could have an idea in the morning, you’d go down to the workshop, and in a day or a week or a month or whatever it was, you had a finished object which, for better or worse, was there. You could record it, you could move on and your ability to see development in your work and to mark your progress was so appealing—that’s what had sold me on furniture, just the directness of it and the ability to be in control of the process.

The ability to see development is rewarding, and applies whether the work is for commissions or public scrutiny.

Native – Simple, Natural, Free from Affectation

Furniture is, simply, about human functions: eating, sitting, lying, storage. But furniture history has shown that it is not only about needs. Ikin understands that, as simple as his aesthetic is, each design requires attention to function and then some: “My job is to extract as much mileage as I can from those human acts” (Walsh 76). ‘Mileage’ means value and Ikin hereby suggests that function is not a hindrance to design but one of the constraints—function, form, materials, technique, aesthetic—that, if carefully addressed, contributes to a valuable outcome. A skilled designer knows which parameters to stress and which to downplay:

There was a period there, through that whole time during the 80s, when there was a bit much of a focus on how beautiful the material was and how clever you could be with it. Whereas I always just like to stand a little further back and think about the objects themselves and what they might be saying. Yes, I love a beautifully made thing but the answer doesn’t lie there. There has to be something more.

The sculptural work that Ikin began in the 1990s attests to “something more” than exploiting the wood’s grain or demonstrating high levels of skill. Rodney Kirk Smith in his invitation for the first of two shows in his gallery gave Ikin carte blanche. Ikin knew of a large oak tree that was slated for felling,  

Figure 142. Humphrey Ikin, Black Squab (left) and South Pacific Throne, 1991 In his review of the RKS exhibition, Dugald Page pointed out the connection between oak as a shipbuilding material that brought 18th century explorers to the South Pacific and its use by Ikin for objects that refer to the indigenous peoples who were explored [Page]. Squab and Throne are primitive, native seats that harken back to New Zealand’s ancestry. Squab, especially, looks like a relic; Throne’s gold surface implies power and dignity. Like ritual artefacts, they were made over time, the maker revisiting them as the wood weathered and changed. The techniques used for these works, compared to those for Figure 140, would have afforded Ikin a change in physical input and creative thinking.

34 Rodney Kirk Smith died in 1996 at the age of 59. He ran RKS Art on Victoria Street in Auckland for 25 years before moving to new premises on Wellesley Street, which he operated for 5 years. He was regarded as “an avid promoter of and mentor to new talent” (Radford).
which he supervised. The lumps of timber, cut to his instructions, were carted to his studio where he worked on them over weeks and months. All of the objects that resulted were carved with a chainsaw and other tools, and were intended to be seen in the round. Yet these works explored function—*South Pacific Throne, Personal Altar, Black Squab* (Figure 142)—thereby challenging viewers to rethink their preconceived ideas about furniture forms.

Ikin’s sculptural explorations pre-empted a danger that Schön identifies for the long-standing reflective practitioner: “as a practice becomes more repetitive and routine, and as knowing-in-practice becomes increasingly tacit and spontaneous, the practitioner may miss important opportunities to think about what he is doing” (61). Choosing to work with ‘unstable’ material requires constant attention, for safety reasons, and induces what could be called hyper-reflection. The unseasoned wood may choose, at any moment, to assert itself, with the result that each move requires reliance on knowing-in-action for a spontaneous response to the unexpected. Affectation is banished, and the result is a bald conversation between the maker and the timber. Ikin’s increasing explorations into sculptural work, beginning with *Room*, offered excitement and new challenges that could be integrated into his entire practice.

The work that Ikin is doing now continues in this vein. Again, beginning with green (undried) timber, he creates his sculptural columns (Figure 143) as the wood seasons, and the inevitable movement and cracks require potential collectors to accept that the sculpture is not inert. This concept may be a difficult one for someone purchasing art as an investment—he or she will be witness to the self-destruction of the wood. But the embodiment of change is “something more.” And change is fundamentally natural and what happens routinely in nature.

Currently, cognisance of nature also embraces the future of the planet. Again, Ikin’s work, in its abstention from superfluity, seems to epitomise the need for consciousness of vanishing resources. Yet, when asked directly about sustainability, he admitted that his ethics and lifestyle, more than the objects, represent his philosophy:

“I think I apply to my work what I apply to my life. I’ve always been conscious of having as low an impact on resources as you can. I’ve never felt the need to be a big consumer and that just carries through. It’s not a fad or anything for me, it’s just the way I’ve always been—I like to be reasonably lean in terms of the way I’ve lived and the way I’ve worked. I don’t apply any rules to my work either, like some things might be very indulgent, just use a lot of material, much more than they need to because that’s what that piece requires. And others might be very very spare on material. I’m no model of sustainable practice from the point of view of the objects themselves but you just work in the same way that you live and it’s the same with architecture. You want things to be a reflection of yourself.”

![Figure 143. Humphrey Ikin, Super-Foot Column, 2006 (3600mm x 300mm²)](image-url)
The Commendation announcing Humphrey Ikin’s Laureate stated: “What has set Humphrey’s work apart is his ongoing interest in the broader context of furniture, its history, its rituals and its future possibilities.” The writer of this statement referred to furniture generically, and omitted mention of New Zealand furniture within the ‘broader context.’ I contend that this is a significant oversight. Ikin is a New Zealander. As he says, “it’s as simple as that.” Simply put, he is of this country, his work reflects the context in which it is made, and his aesthetic is straightforward. Ikin’s furniture is imbued with nuance which is wholeheartedly native.

The Outsider: Greg Bloomfield

In 2010 Greg Bloomfield participated in Shapeshifter, an exhibition of outdoor sculpture held in Lower Hutt. His piece, entitled Te Horo 1 (Figure 144), was not amongst the images in the corresponding newspaper article by Diana Dekker, and its absence may have been due to its lack of exuberance. Instead, the article is dominated by a photograph of a display cabinet entitled Blackie (Figure 144) that looks like an upturned cornucopia sprouting leaves. The horn shape is supported by structural parentheses; the lacquered surfaces, including the acrylic cabinet door that permits viewing shelves inside, disguise the handcrafting which brought Blackie into existence. The piece was from a series made in the mid-2000s that celebrated American craftspeople—Blackie was an homage to Wendell Castle.

Dekker or her editor would have been justified in choosing this piece as a possible lure for Shapeshifter. It is quirky, lyrical, energetic, ingenious and more typical of the portfolio of its maker.

Figure 144. Greg Bloomfield
Left - Te Horo 1 (wind sculpture). Wood, fibreglass, steel (h 100cm)
Right - Blackie, 2008. Composite wood, lacquer, acrylic (180 x 60 x 60 cm)
Centre - Wendell Castle, Black Widow, 2007

Subsequent to one of his last trips to the United States, Bloomfield was inspired to make 12 cabinets dedicated to American artists. Blackie concerns Wendell Castle’s series of black fibreglass works that represented a rework yet new beginning for Castle. The dozen cabinets were to be shown at Leo Kaplan in New York but the New Zealand/United States exchange rate made the American exhibition inviable. They were shown at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington where they were completely out of this international context.
Bloomfield’s work has been described as coming out of the pages of children’s books by Dr Seuss (Dekker); in fact, while it was on display at the Science Centre and Manawatu Museum in Palmerston North, its most appreciative audience was children (Waite). For this reason alone, it is unique in the New Zealand context. It is outside the norm of what is produced by New Zealand makers.

Publicity about Bloomfield is relatively rare, not because his work is poorly conceived or constructed but because he spent over 20 years outside the country. His exhibitions list includes venues in New York, Chicago, London and Paris, and one of his cabinets is included in the history of America’s most prestigious furniture gallery, Pritam & Eames. Bloomfield is (or was) on a first-name basis with makers who are in the canon of studio furniture in the United States—Art Carpenter, Garry Knox Bennett, and Wendell Castle. Mention of these ‘stars’ does not make Bloomfield famous by association but shows that his circle of influence was acquired in the studios of international masters, and by literally and figuratively breathing their sawdust.

What happens to an artist who is successful in an ‘other’ milieu and relocates to different territory? In Bloomfield’s case, the territory was familiar—he was born and grew up in Lower Hutt—but the New Zealand furniture community and its audience, when he returned to it, was unfamiliar to him and with him. Why include such an interloper in this thesis? I will explain by engaging in a slight digression.

As I began this section of my case studies chapter, I viewed Nightwatching, a film about the 17th-century painting The Night Watch (Figure 145) by Rembrandt. Nightwatching is Peter Greenaway’s dramatic rendering of the story behind the painting, a story that has been the subject of much speculation by art historians. In addition to the ‘fictional’ account (Nightwatching), the DVD jewel case contained Rembrandt’s J’accuse, a documentary. Greenaway, as narrator, delineates thirty-four historical facts—the figures portrayed in the painting, imagery, social conditions of the time and biography of the artist—that established the drama’s script. Seen together, Nightwatching and Rembrandt’s J’accuse are one man’s view of what is happening in this historic work of art.

Greenaway begins his documentary by stating that we live in a text-based culture, with the result that we are not trained to ‘read’ visually: his film is a lesson in viewing, one that John Berger also undertook in his seminal 1972 book and BBC television series, Ways of Seeing. This point has relevance to what has already been said in this chapter about conceptual furniture. But one of Greenaway’s crucial points is that Rembrandt van Rijn was an outsider. He was a miller’s son from Leiden who, until the time of painting The Night Watch, gained a reputation for successful commissions in the accepted manner of

35 Bloomfield’s piece, Showcase Cabinet, was part of an exhibition entitled The Cabinetmakers in 1984 (“Pritam & Eames”). The cabinet will be discussed in detail towards the end of this section.
the age. His status was enhanced due to marriage and, through his skill, he associated with the
bourgeois merchant class. In 1642 he was asked to paint the 13th Company of the Amsterdam Militia, and 
Greenaway’s contention is that, as a quasi-insider, Rembrandt was party to secrets, including murder,
that tarnished the repute in which his posers were held. Rembrandt chose to imply this knowledge in
*The Night Watch*. Greenaway suggests that the Militia, composed of ‘the establishment,’ fully
understood Rembrandt’s message yet accepted and hung the picture in Arquebusiers Hall, the Militia
headquarters. Rather than destroy the painting, thereby drawing attention to it, they gradually discredited
Rembrandt so that he died in penury.

I viewed *Nightwatching* and *Rembrandt’s J’accuse* several hours after I began writing about Greg
Bloomfield as an outsider. The coincidence gave me pause, because it highlighted one of the roles of the
artist: to hold up a mirror to society. An artist who is an outsider, and I posited previously that I am an
outsider too, holds a mirror to the inside, or what has been taken for granted. The presence of Greg
Bloomfield, the outsider, amongst the case studies, provides a contrast to ‘what is’ within New Zealand
studio furniture and raises questions about what might have been. This section is divided into discussions
of Bloomfield’s career, his work and his interactions with the New Zealand art world.

**Outside – the Career**

Bloomfield spent his youth, except for regular schooling, in his bedroom making models, primarily
of boats, with cardboard and balsa. He offered an example of his commitment: one of his father’s
favourite ships was the Cutty Sark and because plans were not available locally, they were obtained from
England. He invested years and his father’s money; the ultimate lesson was the discovery of
“perfection”:

> I had it to a stage where I had one more mast to rig and Dad came home that night and he
came to [my room and said], “how’s it going?” And he was obviously quite excited. I went
back to the room after dinner, had a look at it, picked it up and smashed it to pieces. I
decided it wasn’t good enough. And then I **really** started. I can remember to this day, the
feeling grew inside me that if I just spent the time I actually could do it. And I could make
these miniature things perfect and it became an absolute passion. I could see nothing
else.39

From the models he moved up to helping his father, an optician, with his passion, boats. The pair
was so well-tuned that when they fitted out the hull of a 28-foot powerboat (the twelfth of about 23
boats), Greg took the port side and Mervyn did the starboard. His parents purchased wood for his
construction of built-in cupboards in their house and when he went away to school at 16, his rent was
offset by projects for his landlord and his landlord’s friends. His first solo project, at the age of 17, was
restoration of a vintage car including all the woodwork.

In his late teens Bloomfield did a four-year apprenticeship as a fitter and turner as well as studying
mechanical engineering at Wellington Polytechnic. Instead of finishing the latter, which “I couldn’t wait
to get out of,” he decided to go to Europe. However, on the last day of his apprenticeship employment, a
colleague accidentally pierced his skull with a welding rod (Dekker). Following a six-month
hospitalisation he headed overseas, bicycling either with a friend or alone, through the Netherlands,
France, Spain and England. When the excitement of travel wore off he flew to the United States to visit
his sister, who was married and living in Chicago.

Bloomfield was in his early twenties and knew he was looking for something. Over a period of
about a year, he got involved in making furniture and fittings for his sister’s home and church; one
lunchtime, while browsing in a favourite bookstore, he spied a copy of *Fine Woodworking* (November/

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36 Bands of private citizens that originally defended the municipality but later amounted to private men’s clubs
(Greenaway Rembrandt’s).
37 The Rijksmuseum, which owns the painting, states its true title as *The Company of Frans Banning Cocq and Willem
van Ruytenburch (Night Watch).*
38 Purchase of 22 carat gold chain was necessary because it was the only chain in the correct scale for the model.
39 All quotations come from my 2009 interview with Bloomfield.
December 1982) with Art Carpenter (Figure 146) on the cover. It proved pivotal: “from then on I wanted to go and see him. And there was some excitement in me. I thought ahhh, this has gotta be it.” He bought an old car, made it roadworthy, and drove to California. Bloomfield knew that Carpenter lived in Bolinas and went there, with no conception of his next move. As fate would have it, he recognised Carpenter on the street and the consequent conversation produced a list of 15 furniture makers. Bloomfield spent the next three months visiting workshops, discussing furniture and inquiring about possible apprenticeships.

By the time he had been politely turned down by 14 on the list, he resolved to return to New Zealand via Chicago. But he had another serendipitous moment. He was leaving Sacramento when he realised he was missing his wallet and passport. He stopped the car and luckily found them on the roof. Then he noticed that he was parked next to a phone booth:

Had this tingling feeling, last person on the list. Garry Bennett. Shall I call? Thank God I did. Something said, look you'd be stupid, you’ll never be back. But I was fighting—[an inner] conflict—and I walked into his studio later that afternoon and I have never ever wanted to do anything else. That's how it happened, it was like, WoW! It's still there. It’s a very . . . emotion, I can see the day, I can hear what was said.

Garry Knox Bennett is a huge man, both physically and in the American furniture community. He came to prominence for the sacrilegious act of putting a nail in a piece of finely crafted furniture (Figure 147) in defiance of the ‘rules’ of woodworking (Cooke, Ward and L’Ecuyer 72-73). Bennett welcomed
Bloomfield but was initially averse to having another body his studio. He made arrangements for the young man to share space with Don Baden, a maker in the Arts and Crafts tradition, yet frequently took Bloomfield on excursions of Oakland which usually ended in drinking and conversation. Eventually Bennett invited him to undertake an update of Squirkenworks, Bennett’s gold and silver-plating factory. Fitting and turning knowledge enabled Bloomfield to replace the boilers and pipes, and his earnings facilitated his own work in the evenings in Bennett’s studio. Bloomfield had found what he was looking for but, reluctantly, had to move on:

So that worked out brilliantly for a long long time. I got to meet a lot of people. Well, it was home. I just didn’t wanna go anywhere else. And then he said to me—I had finished at the factory and he just said to me one day, “look, I don’t really want you in the shop anymore. I need it to myself. But what I’ll do, I’ve got a friend over in New York and I’ll give him a call.” So that was Wendell. I went over there. Got to admit I still wish that I would’ve stayed because Garry was my sort of thing. Although we never had a personality clash, we could’ve, just in terms of being in each other’s space. And I was getting more and more I needed my space and he needed his.

It is understandable that the young Bloomfield would want to stay with Bennett. He is extroverted, irreverent, and the life of the party; Wendell Castle is a gentleman (Figure 148), philosopher and teacher. Bloomfield admits that, being in Scottsville, New York, proved to be his making:

So working with Wendell was good and he and I just clicked. And the type of work and the experience I was getting, that’s where I really learned. Things that I could do very well I learned how to do properly. And that became, God, an absolute fetish. And I worked there day and night, seven days a week. Did that for 12 years. I lived it.

Bennett’s referral to Castle ensured Bloomfield a place amongst the 20 students in the teaching programme being offered in the Wendell Castle School but he could not afford the tuition. He plucked up the courage to admit his shortfall and asked if there was some way he could stay. When

40 I met Garry Bennett at the Furniture Society Conference in Boston in June 2010. When I mentioned my connection with Greg he described him as exceptional in being able to turn his hand to anything. Bennett spoke highly of their friendship.

41 During my first year as a graduate student in the United States, Don McKinley, my former studio master at Sheridan College, died. The subsequent memorial service was held in a packed auditorium at Sheridan. Wendell Castle was one of the speakers and eulogised his friend and former colleague with palpable emotion.

42 I have a poster, Wendell Castle’s 10 Adopted Rules of Thumb: 1. If you are in love with an idea, you are no judge of its beauty or value; 2. It is difficult to see the whole picture when you are inside the frame; 3. After learning the tricks of the trade, don’t think you know the trade; 4. We hear and apprehend what we already know; 5. The dog that stays on the porch will find no bones; 6. Never state a problem to yourself in the same terms it was brought to you; 7. If it’s offbeat or surprising, it’s probably useful; 8. If you don’t expect the unexpected, you will not find it; 9. Don’t get too serious; 10. If you hit the bull’s eye every time, the target is too near.
Castle learned that Bloomfield was the designer and maker of the cabinet he was finishing (started in California), he offered him part-time employment. Bloomfield initially was able to contribute metalwork skills and eventually executed his employer’s designs (Figure 148). Yet it was more than that:

It certainly started off employer but [he was] more of a mentor because we understood [each other] and I was given projects and I would just go ahead and do them. He never had to explain anything. And they were done in record time so there was a lot more time spent together. And we seemed to spend time in trips to New York. Just he and I would go walking. Look at shops and look at things and talk about things. That, for me, was pretty special. I felt special. I was kind of the golden boy. Albeit being teased by people. But it didn’t really worry me because I just had access to this wonderful shop. It was, you know, living the dream. Because not only did I get to make but [I was] interested in America too. So I was sent all round to do deliveries.

Castle assisted in Bloomfield’s obtaining a Green Card in 1993, the necessary document that permits employment in the United States. But two years later, on a visit to New Zealand precipitated by concern about his parents’ ageing, he lost the Card by not returning to America within the requisite six months. For the subsequent years he divided his time between Scottsville and Masterton, entering the United States as a visitor. He was doing well, exhibiting in galleries such as Leo Kaplan in New York, and enjoying a “perfect lifestyle . . . until 9/11 and once that happened, everything changed.”

The climate for all art altered dramatically on 11 September 2001. Bloomfield was in Florida delivering commissions just prior to the collapse of the World Trade Centre; from then until 2005 he made occasional trips to the United States but it became less and less financially viable. The fraternity of studio furniture makers suffered financially and, with sales dwindling, it was unprofitable to ship work from New Zealand. Bloomfield’s exhibition record shows a steady presence on the New Zealand gallery scene beginning in 1991. Since 2002 he has concentrated his energies on this country, trying to make a living as he did in America.

This synopsis outlines a very different career than those described for Carin Wilson and Humphrey Ikin. What Greg Bloomfield experienced was ‘normal’ for American studio furniture makers of the second generation, as identified by Cooke. He was inspired and mentored by a sizeable network of practitioners in both California and New England; he pursued a trajectory that he inculcated as he associated with that community. In addition, he had academic training, one of the characteristics Cooke specified in his definition of studio furniture. Bloomfield provided a description of the education to which he was exposed:

Basically day one, in terms of the practical side—you had to have certain tools obviously—you were given a piece of wood, rough sawn, and you had to plane it flat by hand, square, all that sort of thing. Once you passed that you were given another project you had to make [Figure 149]. You weren’t allowed to use any machines whatsoever. And it just went on like that. And in between times there was formal tuition. Stephen Proctor, who was a

Figure 149. Greg Bloomfield, End Tables (2), c. 1982. Bird’s eye maple
This image, discovered on the internet, stated that the tables were made as a final project for a class at the Wendell Castle School. The pair were sold in July 2008. When brought to Bloomfield’s attention, he said that he had forgotten about the pieces.
woodworker from England—in terms of tools, he just blew me away with what he could do. Another shiver ran up my spine when he actually showed me how to do certain things. Like I'd sharpen things but I never got them quite right. So that just hit a new level for me. And we were taken to factories; we had an art history course; we had drawing class and then later on, in second year, there was life drawing and more intense art history. Rendering, drawing.

This is the education that Carin Wilson observed in 1982 when he visited the Wendell Castle School, and he summarised it as follows:

This is another in a new group of privately run workshops . . . a leading practitioner setting up a school adjacent to his own studio. The quality of instruction is felt to be considerably enhanced by the access that the student has to observing the practical aspects of running a workshop. When they have completed the programme the students indeed seem to have had valuable introductions to kick off their own careers. The work produced is of a high standard and the size of classes must lead one to conclude that this would be a very good way to learn.

The immersion master-apprentice model was greatly beneficial to Bloomfield—he learned formally as well as by association, experience and application. The immersion suited his personality (see below), exposed him to the kind of commitment necessary to succeed, and provided access to a network that acknowledged and sustained him. Bloomfield’s education, experience and colleagues were and are outside the New Zealand norm. I will now discuss his personality as a contributing factor to my choice of label for him.

Outside – the Work

Biography matters in evaluating work. This is particularly true in social worlds that esteem creative and publicly talented workers—writers, actors, politicians, chefs, business executives, or sports figures. . . . An awareness of a life story provides an enriched insight into innovative objects and events. The who explains the what (Fine Everyday 55).

Gary Fine’s subject matter is self-taught or outsider art, but his assertion applies to craft practitioners. The most important value of craft-based commodities is that they are hand-made by an individual. Marketing craft from a booth at a craft event or the studio itself connects the maker, the object and the buyer. A purchaser responds to the personality and ‘story’ of the maker as well as the story behind their object—its materials, techniques, inspiration. Getting to know the who maker encourages treasuring the what made.

Yet Greg Bloomfield has a problem with respect to fostering the maker/owner connection: “I just do not let anybody know where I am. Even to not having a number on the gate. Why? I just don’t like people, all of a sudden, walking in here.” Bloomfield’s reserve is not about privacy or safety. It is about his preference for being alone. In the transcript of our interview there are about 20 references to being a loner by choice. For instance, he told me that his preoccupation with model-making meant that he did not bring a friend home until he was 14 years old. Bloomfield acknowledges that his ‘handicap’ even extended to his sister, Lesley, who occupied the adjacent bedroom when he was growing up:

As a person, and that was and still is my problem, I never interacted with people. I had no idea how to talk or make conversation, it was always internal. So it wasn’t until I was 21 that I actually met her. The day, for both of us, we talk about it now, it was a day, oh my God, this is my sister. Well, I think she’s my sister. And now we know that, but it was a very odd experience and that was in Chicago.

Lesley had tutored him in maths in secondary school, a task-oriented activity, as was the boat building with his father: no social skills needed. So the side-by-side relationship that Bloomfield had with Garry Bennett and later Wendell Castle replicated the family dynamic. He thrived and excelled in this context: “Wendell and I got on so well because we didn’t need to say two words to each other. We could work side-by-side all day all night where other people justbugged the hell out of him.” Bloomfield
observed behaviour as well as practice during his years with Castle, and it was evident that Castle's solitariness was not a hindrance to his success. Hence, there was no need for the acolyte to adjust personality.

Bloomfield, like Ikin, is an introvert. His focus, as he said above, is inward and this would eventually manifest itself as the signature in his work. But it didn’t happen without anguish. To demonstrate the emergence of his personality I compare two cabinets: one made during the 1980s and the other in the early 1990s. The earlier, Showcase Cabinet (mentioned above), could be said to be a competent, well-crafted piece of studio furniture. It displayed sufficient merit (Figure 150) to attract the attention of Wendell Castle and, later, Bebe and Warren Johnson at Pritam & Eames. It combines exotic wood, glass and silver, and is a practical, functional piece that would readily complement a contemporary urban environment. Yet it displays little of Bloomfield's own personality, nothing that identifies it with a unique maker.

On the other hand, Make My Day (Figure 151), part of the But Where Do We Put It? exhibition at Masterworks in Auckland in May 1993, is functioning sculpture: eccentric, fantastic, animated, anthropomorphic. Helen Schamroth, who reviewed the exhibit for the New Zealand Herald, saw first-hand that the piece was one of a group that was “stylishly conceived and executed,” with “surprisingly

Figure 150. Cover, The Cabinetmakers; Greg Bloomfield, Showcase Cabinet. Bubinga, ebony, glass, silver Pritam & Eames’ 1984 catalogue (far left) for The Cabinetmakers, in which Showcase Cabinet appeared, has Bloomfield’s name at the top of the list of exhibitors. The others were Richard Cohen, John Dodd, John Dunnigan, David Ebner, Penny Gebhard, Hank Gilpin, George Gordon, Bill Keyser, Silas Kopf, Peter Korn, James Krenov, Tom Loeber, Ben Mack, Charles Mark, Alan Marks, Wendy Maruyama, Judy Kensley McKie, Richard Newman, Ronald Puckett, Stewart Wurtz. Bloomfield was amongst colleagues who would go on to be notable American studio furniture makers. Showcase Cabinet shows an obvious resemblance to Garry Bennett’s Nail Cabinet and was largely made in Bennett’s workshop in Oakland. At this stage of his career, Bloomfield was learning by emulating the aesthetic of his ‘master.’

Figure 151. Greg Bloomfield, Make My Day, 1991
Like many of Bloomfield’s pieces, Make My Day references music, housing a CD player and amplifier. The form is appropriate for function, and features such as knobs are purposeful yet decorative. The colour palette, at this stage in Bloomfield’s career, gives precedence to natural wood. The phrase “make my day” was spoken by Clint Eastwood in Dirty Harry in 1971 (Siegel). The animated stance of Bloomfield’s cabinet recalls the shooting action in the diner when Eastwood uttered the infamous words, “Go ahead—make my day.”

43 It was this piece that prompted Castle to offer Bloomfield employment in order to pay his tuition fees.
44 This piece originated in California but it adheres to Bloomfield’s concentration on forms to suit the New York market, where tall cabinets are better suited to apartments with limited floor space.
well integrated components and wry humour,” and came from a “furniture maker of considerable talent and expertise” (Schamroth “Whimsy”). As a knowledgeable craft commentator she described the work as “enchanting,” and that it “should make people take note.” ‘Taking note’ requires recognising an individual aesthetic: the characteristics of Make My Day are novel and identify its author. In the United States, at this time, its maker was ferried from the airport to central Manhattan in a limousine because his work was profitable for his gallery.

Bloomfield’s transition from competent to unique required toil. There was a time when he was enamoured of Memphis (Figure 152) and its philosophy that everything should be different, but this proved to be a drawback in terms of getting into a gallery. He made several trips to New York, taking advantage of introductions by Castle, but each time the galleries rejected his portfolio. Finally he was bold enough to ask what was wrong with his work. The reply: you have no distinctive style. Bloomfield returned to Castle’s studio and queried his mentor, “is it true I have no style? And he just said, yep . . . people wanna walk in [to a gallery] and say, is that a Greg Bloomfield?” Castle suggested that Bloomfield try working on a series and he groped around for a theme:

I thought, what do you have trouble with? Well, no matter what it is, I have trouble with legs. So I thought I’ll come up with a shape and I’ll use that same shape whether I do a table, a chair, a cabinet or whatever. And as I did it, oh my God, things started to roll along and I could see and I think that was probably a big turning point, where it just hit me—oh gosh, you can bounce from one idea to another. And then I had to hold myself back coz I was trying too hard. And I made a few pieces and then got them [into a gallery] and they just took off. We sold them and I thought, I’m here.

Bloomfield says his inspiration comes from music, movement, jokes and cartoons. He prefers a complicated technical challenge and indulges in a complex aesthetic (“Greg”). He has the expertise to incorporate intricate electronic componentry (Figure 153) and welcomes problem-solving beyond his range of expertise: “I have a basic philosophy that if I’ve seen furniture before, I don’t want to do it” (“Greg”). In addition, he wants to tell a story and doesn’t see why practicality has to be bereft of humour or satire. Like Carin Wilson, he engages in conceptual/narrative furniture.

45 I am citing here from my 2009 interview with Bloomfield; Schamroth recognised that the works “owe a good deal of their inspiration to the Memphis movement” (Schamroth “Whimsy”).
Many of his works embody benign, light-hearted concepts or stories (Figure 154), but others comment on New Zealand society. The latter is reflected in Dilemma (Figure 155), which was shown at Framed. It depicts the maker’s dilemma of whether to stay in New Zealand or return to the United States. What he felt about his native land at that time was that it was “crooked.” He explained: “We are standing on eggshells particularly with racial issues, the economy and a lot more items like that. . . . Therefore it is kind of a balancing act I feel we are living at this point” (Williams). The composition of Dilemma reflects the last line of The Crooked Man nursery rhyme, “And they all lived together in a little crooked house.” A viewer does not need to know this to appreciate Dilemma. Bloomfield likes to provide his clients with secret devices and openings: “only people who own it actually know how to operate it” (Rewi), and the story behind this piece and others could also be secret. But the creation of enigmas has a price relative to the conventions of the world in which they are created.

As an imaginative maker, it is not surprising that Bloomfield’s work appears other-worldly, quixotic and fanciful. Even in the best economic times, the percentage of the population willing to invest in an animated bed or desk (Figure 156) is minimal. New Zealand’s current population of 4,400,000 means that his prospective clients are few, and those few cannot be expected to find makers via websites. The diminishment in the number of furniture exhibitions is a serious handicap to selling objects that bear substantial price tags.

Bloomfield has stated: “One rule I wanted to live by was I would do what I wanted to do in this life” (Williams). He has had to compromise that stance, to some degree, to survive in New Zealand. He has done custom kitchen installations and high end commissions—the Cultural Affairs Ministry has a reception desk and boardroom table (Figure 157). He did a show of small clocks (Figure 158) at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington in 2007, opened his doors for the Kapiti Coast Arts Trail in 2008, and tried kinetic sculpture for Shapeshifter in 2010. Yet there is always a looming anxiety: “I was torn apart that I might actually have to get a job” (Dekker).

Bloomfield is not a dilettante. But, at this stage, he—and I—can only speculate: would his self be better realised in the United States? I now turn to the New Zealand studio furniture community of which Bloomfield is and is not a member.
Outside – the Community

Bloomfield is part of what Becker calls an “art world”: a sociological phenomenon in which conventions are honoured by artists and their cooperative networks. Within such a world there are a range of players, from eccentrics to traditionalists, yet as long as everyone—artists, curators, audience, press, and the state—understands the rules, the art world functions. Newcomers are initiated into the conventions in order to survive (Becker).

Studio furniture itself is a micro art world. When I started this research I assumed that the studio furniture community was an international art world, and it is to some degree. New Zealand practitioners can knock on the doors of foreign workshops and be welcomed in the woodworking argot. But the
example of Greg Bloomfield points out that a visit is a different matter than relocation. Studio furniture in the United States conditions its players to a different ‘world’ than its New Zealand counterpart.

When Bloomfield left behind the community of practice that accepted and fostered him, he tried to participate in an art world in New Zealand. At first it seemed no different than what he was used to. In Wellington, Bloomfield showed work at Artex (Art and Interior Design Expo) in 1991 alongside some of the Alternative Furniture Show participants, and in 1992 had a show at the Bowen Gallery, a small venue normally devoted to painting. The same year he received a creative grant from the QEI Arts Council to mount an exhibition, Just Furniture?, at the Dowse Museum. Response was good: “That’s the one, I think, that people started to take a bit of notice. Because one of the pieces was bought by the Dowse for their collection [Figure 159]. And there were a lot of newspaper and magazine articles about it.” In 1993 he had the aforementioned solo show at Masterworks in Auckland. Prospects looked exciting: “I quickly moved on. I think I did one in Manawatu [1995], one in Hawkes Bay [1995]. Oh it just kept happening.”

During this period, it must be remembered, Bloomfield was travelling back and forth to New York State, earning American dollars. Meanwhile, in New Zealand, the Furniture Group disappeared in 1991, the Crafts Council died in 1992, the Alternative Furniture Shows stopped in 1993, Artiture ended in 1994, and the last major furniture exhibit in the North Island was Framed at the Dowse in 1997. Resources for the formerly healthy community were dwindling. Bloomfield had not built up local networks—he was not a member of the Furniture Group or the Crafts Council—during the healthy years and he was increasingly reliant on New Zealand projects during the downturn. When he realised he needed to engage with his new ‘world’ he made an attempt to communicate with his peers. He attended the forum held in conjunction with Framed (page 115), but admitted to “[shooting] myself in the foot in terms of becoming involved.” His “let’s just get in and do it, let’s not talk” personality became frustrated with hours of debate and a suggestion of another meeting. He wanted an action plan to create exposure and gain recognition for furniture, and walked out of the gathering because nothing concrete appeared to

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46 I mentioned in Chapter 1 that Nelson Guide Book: Art in its Own Place had identified furniture makers who were excluded from my initial search list. One, Andreas Niemann, is a German master craftsman whose road to being accepted by the Nelson woodworking establishment has not been easy (Niemann).

47 An advertisement for Artex described “the Show within a Show!” (Artex). Makers from the Alternative Furniture Show plus others like Bloomfield and Uwe Steidinger displayed “alternatives to mass-produced design” (“Alternatives”).

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be happening. “I decided, oh well, I’ll just go on my own again.”

As noted in Chapter 3, this forum achieved no consensus, and, when asked about it, Humphrey Ikin said, with a wry smile, that he had never been that keen on sitting in darkened rooms talking about furniture. He felt it was good for the sake of collegiality but admitted he did not get involved because he was preoccupied with preparations for Facing North and was unable to empathise with problems that did not affect him (Personal 2011). Thus, Bloomfield raised the mirror and hoped everyone would see the ‘reality,’ that studio furniture needed more recognition. He was right but, in fact, there were differing realities at the forum and his peripheral involvement in the community exacerbated his credibility as the agent to hold the mirror and spearhead a solution.48

It could be said that Bloomfield shot himself in both feet—in one because of his personality and the other because of his residency in the United States. Not only was he not ‘mates’ with the New Zealand makers, but he was not here to take the workshops by Krenov that galvanised his peers. Bloomfield admired Garry Bennett and Bennett “believed that Krenov’s preciousness was misplaced in an industrial world” (Cooke et al. 72). The aforementioned Nail Cabinet was Bennett’s anti-preciousness statement, and Bloomfield paid homage to that statement in Showcase Cabinet. Bloomfield’s philosophical alignment with Bennett rather than Krenov was not apparent in New Zealand—my research unearths this fact—but difference was. Different education, career, mentors, and opportunities were patently evident in very different work. When coupled with the fact that Bloomfield had succeeded elsewhere, tension between him and New Zealand practitioners was understandable.

Within the New Zealand studio furniture community—not the American one—Bloomfield comes close to what Howard Becker calls a “maverick” (233-246). Mavericks begin their careers in the conventional community but engage in innovations that the rest of the community refuses to accept. They embrace some of the aspects of their community—for instance, using the same materials and processes—but primarily stay on its periphery. At the same time, “[t]hey want to be supported and appreciated by the same audiences more conventional artists play to, although the new and unfamiliar works require audiences to work harder” (244). So while Greg Bloomfield’s practice and techniques are the same as his peers, his practice’s output—furniture strongly based in narrative—puts him on the periphery.

The segment of the New Zealand audience willing to “work harder” recognises Bloomfield’s strong personal connection to the extra-ordinary objects he makes. Because his sociality is internal, he builds relationships with people through his objects. His investment in making and his clients is emotive and affecting. As such, his work is the antithesis of generic consumer goods. Thus, while Bloomfield, himself and his aesthetic, are on the periphery—not everyone could accept Noah’s Tipsy into their bedroom—

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48 Bloomfield said that when the appointment of a chairman was proposed he volunteered because no-one else did. The collective response to his stepping forward was to have more discussion.
his studio furniture fully embraces the norms of holistic craft and craft as care.

*Dilemma* represents much more than Greg Bloomfield intended. In addition to the personal dilemma of staying or going, and the New Zealand dilemma of integration or exclusivity, the cabinet raises a mirror to an art world that has been constrained. *Dilemma* represents what craft can achieve: in a society, if support is available for education and resources; in a community of practitioners, if it can get training and exposure to a range of practice; and in an audience, if it is witness to a plurality of aesthetics and culture. We now move on to a practitioner who is attempting to address some of these constraints and redress the absences.

**The Teacher: John Shaw**

John Shaw (Figure 160) has been teaching furniture-making in New Zealand for about 25 years. He is unique in this record because there were no other academically-trained woodworkers who committed to teaching when the tertiary programmes were inaugurated in 1986; and with only two full-time programmes extant in the country now, the opportunities for a prolonged teaching career are negligible. A commitment of that longevity suggests a vocation rather than a job, a calling that necessitates weathering the social, political and economic changes that beset a country over a quarter of a century. Long-standing professionals are often asked, what keeps you going? Although I did not query him specifically about this, Shaw volunteered:

> I get great satisfaction from the excitement I see in people who make the discoveries that are there to be made about being creative with wood. And that will never change. And that, actually, is the tradition. That's where the tradition lies. The translation of information and ideas and skill from one person to the next, because of a mutual interest. And it's a powerful motivator to know that.49

Shaw states here that his motivation is seeing the consequences of creative knowledge, specifically woodworking knowledge passed on to a next generation. He is a purveyor of tradition, yet slightly earlier in our interview he said he was not sure where his credibility as a teacher came from. I believe it comes, in large part, from his embedding in tradition in England, the United States, Scandinavia and New Zealand. Furthermore, students, as discerning learners, recognise and respect tradition and value teachers with direct links to its roots. Personality and compatibility certainly contribute to an educator’s success, but Shaw’s curriculum vitae attests to a strong connection to the furniture-making heritage. He facilitates the perpetuation of a craft.

The result of teaching skills is that time for doing them is reduced. There are not enough hours in a

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49 Unless noted otherwise, quotations come from my 2009 interview with Shaw.
day to be a dedicated educator, exhibiting artist, and community contributor, and have any semblance of family life. If one of these roles is sacrificed it is usually the artist: the quantity of work cannot match the output of non-teaching peers. Yet Shaw’s record, while containing no solo furniture exhibitions, shows regular contributions to, and commendations from significant New Zealand exhibitions, thereby ensuring a public profile and setting a standard for students.

This section will cover John Shaw’s teaching and making and conclude with his legacy: the work of the next generation, who embody the furniture-making tradition as it goes forward.

Student and Teacher

John Shaw was born in 1957 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, and came to New Zealand when he was ten. His family settled in Hamilton. Following primary and secondary school he attended the University of Waikato, studying Geography for a year. Geography proved to be only a means to an end because one of his university friends wanted to build a wood lathe and the task fell to Shaw’s father, a sheet-metal tradesman. The university programme was abandoned and Shaw experimented with woodturning, eventually moving to Nelson where he established himself as a full-time turner (Figure 161) and maker of small looms. Recognising the need for more training, he returned to England with his bride-to-be (a British visitor to Nelson) and enrolled at Rycotewood College in September 1981.

Rycotewood was established in 1938 in Thame, Oxfordshire \(^{50}\) with the aim of disseminating the highest standards of craftsmanship; of equal importance was design as both an organisational and an aesthetic skill (“History”). Shaw completed a Certificate in Fine Craftsmanship and Design intended for mature students who wished to expand their skills: courses included design and technical studies, the history of design, furniture industry structure and reproduction. When Carin Wilson visited the College in 1982 he noted: “The end of year student show was possibly the most accomplished that I saw with a uniformly high standard. The results of the mature student programme were of particular interest” (Wilson A Report).

Shaw also obtained qualification by the City and Guilds London Institute, an accreditation body that administers standard examinations (City & Guilds). Shaw’s year at Rycotewood and qualification in advanced furniture craft in 1982 “gave me the confidence to feel I had the skills to tackle anything” (J. Shaw “John Shaw: Furniture” 30). An added confidence booster came when his piece (Figure 162) from the end-of-year exhibition was sold and featured in several British magazines (Shaw CV). He returned to

\(^{50}\) The Rycotewood Furniture School relocated to Oxford City in 2004 (“History”).
New Zealand in September 1984 where he set up a workshop in the Teal Valley, northeast of Nelson. For the next two years he was a self-employed furniture maker, doing commissions and contributing to exhibitions in Nelson and Christchurch; he also established the Nelson Guild (page 93).

A piece from this period gives an indication of his aesthetic. On the occasion of the first Alternative Furniture Show in Christchurch in May 1983, Shaw showed a dining table belonging to a Nelson family. The purpose of the show was to acquaint consumers with one-of-a-kind furniture and, possibly, engender orders, so the display of a piece that already had owners was not unusual. It was described (Buckenham 15) as Shaw’s first commission after returning from England and the design brief called for a circular table (Figure 163). The result was hexagonal but chamfered edges gave the illusion of curve. The extensive use of green in the table’s future locale prompted Shaw’s choice of wood: cherry has a greenish tone and is also durable enough to withstand a family’s wear-and-tear. Buckenham stated that Shaw was working on chairs to go with the table.

Shaw recalled that when he returned to New Zealand with his qualifications he “wanted to make everything perfect.” This meant he was spending too much time on each piece, but instead of sacrificing his standards he chastised himself for not working fast enough. He took a week’s breather in 1983 when James Krenov held a workshop in Wellington, and was unexpectedly immersed in new challenges.

Figure 162. John Shaw, Hall Table. Andaman padauk and ebony
The design was based on Chinese altar tables seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The purchaser, an English furniture historian, stated: “I was impressed by your beautifully proportioned, balanced and made hall table with its subtle placing of figure and grain and general attention to detail” [J. Shaw John Shaw]. The upward sweeping top surface, leg form, and proportion of ancient Chinese tables have been adapted in a design that is contemporary and original. Ebony vertical elements suggest Japan.

Figure 163. John Shaw, Dining Table, 1982. Cherry; Dining Chair. European cherry
The table sits on six ‘feet,’ three of which extend further than their mates. This structural detail maintains the table’s balance at the same time as facilitating the placement of chairs and diners. The upward-sweeping supports contribute a sense of movement and contrast to the planar nature of the top and feet. The chair incorporates a scarf joint, connecting the curved rail to the chair legs, that Shaw describes as a signature feature. He states that he uses sketches, models and full-scale mock-ups to ensure that proportions are satisfying, the piece is suitable for its location and use, and his clients are happy. The publication of this table in Designscape (Sept. 1983: 15), the journal of the New Zealand Industrial Design Council, demonstrated the Council’s endorsement of designs being produced by studio furniture makers (Colin Slade and Marc Zuckerman were also included in the article by Buckenham).
Shaw’s evident skill and affability made a connection with Krenov and he says he was “bribed” to consider what would become one of the privileges of his life: “One morning at the workshop, [Krenov] took me out into the corridor and produced one of the wonderful planes he makes and said, ‘I want you to have this’” (J. Shaw “John Shaw: Furniture” 30). While Shaw listened incredulously, Krenov outlined a plan for nine months’ study at the College of the Redwoods. After a year of writing letters and completing applications,51 Shaw obtained a QEII Arts Council Travel Grant of $7,000 (Lomas) and a Fulbright Cultural Grant for the trip to California, followed by visits to prominent cabinetmakers in the United Kingdom and Denmark.

Shaw wrote about his Redwoods experience for *New Zealand Crafts*. This is one of the rare instances of Shaw as author, wherein he makes observations about the learning experiences he observed at the College: his teacher “was always there, always working and always interested in what I was doing”; his fellow students were “totally committed”; and the group he was part of: “struggling with our inabilities and gradually getting over them and getting better . . . you realised there were others working in the same way as you and that you were certainly not special”52 (J. Shaw “John Shaw: Furniture” 30). These comments signify more than just the contributing factors to his “wonderful experience.” Shaw imbibed the value of a dedicated teacher and motivated students in a non-judgemental environment. He would incorporate these values in the teaching opportunity that presented itself on his return to New Zealand and, later, in his own school.

Shaw taught at the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology, beginning in 1985. He was responsible for the woodworking programme; his fellow instructors were craftspeople in fine metals and ceramics who joined forces with an already existing weaving school. Shaw recalls this period with satisfaction. He listed the reasons: he had a “focused purpose” instead of pursuing a wide range of interests; he was associating with a core of good tutors; he enjoyed the crossover of disciplines, especially between jewellery and wood; students were motivated; the programme ran well; and there was ample funding to hire technicians and foster an exciting, stress-free atmosphere. Megan Huffadine, who taught drawing and design at NMIT with Shaw, was mentored by him in her experiments in furniture. Huffadine credits Shaw with her productive experience in Nelson, both in terms of teaching and the future direction of her sculpture (Figure 164).53

Shaw’s penchant for teaching was not confined to his day job. Scanning the March 1988 pages of *Touch Wood* I noticed that Shaw’s reputation was being used to attract night-class registration. Noeline Brokenshire wrote: “At last some comprehensive help is available to woodworkers in the form of instruction from one who is well versed in fine woodworking, who is an excellent tutor and who has had the best training possible” (“In Touch” Mar. 1988 24). By 1988, when the Diploma in Craft Design came on stream, Nelson was the primary deliverer of furniture instruction in the country. An advertisement by Nelson Polytechnic in that year provided details of the 36-week course whose tuition ($250) and fees ($1,100) were eligible for the Tertiary Assistance Grant (“Diploma”).

On the same page as this advertisement, Shaw addressed the readers of *The New Zealand Woodworker* with information about the Nelson programme, including the following:

> Within the New Zealand woodworking and furniture making sphere we can generally be proud of our technical quality and ability, but this is rarely matched by design skills. There is a tendency to water down and simplify new fashions from overseas and at New Zealand shows and exhibitions we see badly distorted regurgitations and stylised examples of these

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51 During this period he also attended the Alan Peters workshop held in Nelson in February 1984.
52 Shaw said that his year, 1984-85, was dubbed the “gourmet” year. The class of 21 students, after spending hours side-by-side in the workshop, frequently reconvened for self-catered delectable dinners.
53 The respect was mutual. Shaw commented on Huffadine’s work in *Framed*: “There were beautiful pieces of work from Megan, beautiful wall cabinets that were sculpted and painted—fantastic.”
movements. The most recent example of this relates to the Memphis style. . . . So how do we change this? (J. Shaw “John Shaw on Nelson”)

There is no evidence that Memphis was ubiquitous yet the disdain in which it was held meant it was trotted out as questionable design. Shaw need not have disparaged Memphis—as has been noted previously in this thesis, critics had targeted substandard New Zealand design for decades. Now, as a reputable teacher, Shaw proposed that, in addition to construction skills, “the abilities to visualise, think laterally and solve problems can also be learnt and practised . . . to easily explore and express our ideas, whether they come from a desire to be innovative and distinctive or to quietly work through complexities of proportion and form” (J. Shaw “John Shaw on Nelson”). Below his admonition, Nelson Polytechnic offered a 12-week full-time foundation course specifically for practising woodworkers so they could improve two- and three-dimensional design and ally them with practical skills (“Woods”). The Polytechnic was emulating Rycotewood’s mature student programme.

As noted previously (page 126), Shaw left NMIT in 1999 and returned to making furniture, concentrating on public and private commissions. He remained involved with the Nelson Guild and contributed to its members’ skill advancement. On the occasion of an exhibition to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Guild, David Haig stated: “We always try to offer in our meetings something technical or a little different that sort of stretches people . . . . It’s about encouraging woodwork to be not just a sort of ‘let’s knock it together and hope it hangs together and that’ll do’ kind of approach, but to make woodwork something that is more refined in terms of technique” (Moriarty “Notching”). This atmosphere raised the standards of the Guild as a whole and encouraged hobbyists to aspire to the quality of their professional Guild peers.

By 2004 the notion of teaching was again in the air: Shaw had had consistent enquiries about classes (Moriarty “A New”) and “always fantasised about a fine furniture school in Nelson.” When Andrew Bruce, one of Shaw’s former students, offered financial backing and administrative expertise, Shaw collaborated with his brother-in-law, David Haig, to make the fantasy become reality. Bruce, a retired Scottish army officer, settled in Nelson with his New Zealand wife in 2003; after commissioning a dining table and six chairs from Shaw, he enrolled in one of his courses and was inspired (“Aiming”). Bruce stated, “To be a world class designer and craftsman as well as a fine tutor is an extremely rare combination. To have a school with two tutors of that calibre, in a location like Nelson, is an amazing opportunity” (“International Fine”).

Haig and Shaw inaugurated a beginners’ cabinetmaking class one afternoon per week using their own equipment; at the same time, funding permitted promotion and the establishment of a charitable trust to operate the school as a business. The Centre for Fine Woodworking (CFW) held its first class in dedicated premises in September 2006 (Figure 165) on a site contributed by Murray and Karen Gill (V. Guild); the first graduates of the nine-month, full-time course displayed their finished products on 11 December 2007 (Centre). Bruce believed that what the CFW offered was “not necessarily a vocational course, but for many it will be the acquisition of a life-enhancing skill (“International Fine”). Within this category is John Wild, a Justice of the Court of Appeal. Wild has a holiday property near Nelson and, building on his rudimentary woodworking in primary school and purchase of equipment while at Law School, he has taken courses at the CFW; he is now devoted to making furniture for his home (Clark). Wild recommends that retirees think about doing a course at the CFW because, “they’ll go home with something precious and beautiful that they’ve made; something to keep forever and pass on to their young ones” (Clark 16).

John Shaw’s career had come full circle. He and Haig established a school that honoured the English cabinet-making tradition that Rycotewood embodied. Students in the full-time programme are guided through the acquisition of skills. First comes tool sharpening and a puzzle project to teach.

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54 Jeremy Reynolds and Carin Wilson were inspired by Sottsass; Greg Bloomfield, also a Memphis fan, was not on the scene at this stage. The criticism of Memphis was based on ignorance. Rossi’s research on Italian design (Rossi “Furniture”) and furniture points out that the Memphis pieces were one-of-a-kind objects meticulously made by artisans. However, their power “came from their visible negation of craft” (Rossi “How” 63). If New Zealand makers had been able to view Memphis construction techniques, their opinions might have been different.
accurate measuring, sawing and planing—a former carpenter joked with me about having to put aside his stubby pencil for a scriber. Then students tackle set pieces of furniture: dovetail cabinet, frame-and-panel cabinet, classical chair. Sessions in marquetry and bending wood expand the repertoire and take advantage of regional expertise. Like Rycotewood, the CFW’s mission statement emphasises high quality; also, like the Rycotewood that Shaw attended, the setting is rural. There is something primordial about being close to earth and nature rather than squeezing your timber into a service elevator.

But more than the school in Oxfordshire, the Centre for Fine Woodworking is modelled after the College of the Redwoods. James Krenov was too infirm to visit the Centre by the time it came into being but he would have felt at home. I asked Shaw if he was following in Krenov’s footsteps (Figure 166). He said, “no,” and added, “the only parallel is that we teach.” I was unsatisfied with that answer, given the esteem in which Shaw holds Krenov and the tradition that is evident in the projects coming out of the CFW. I changed my tack and asked whether Krenov was a subliminal presence. I received, “No. No. No, I don’t even [pause].” And then, “Look. If I stood next to him and said, do I measure up, the answer is no. But, do I care? The answer is no. I’m just someone different. I do things differently and there’s probably a little more reality in the way I approach things but possibly not enough in some people’s minds.” The final part of the sentence was said with laughter, representing Shaw’s awareness of the rocky balance between separation from the master (for whatever reasons) and adherence to his example.

Shaw does not put himself in Krenov’s shoes. To do so is risky. Rodney Hayward, another College of the Redwoods graduate, stated: “to be labelled, or to have one’s work labelled ‘Krenovian’ was to be apparently cast into a critical oubliette” (Hayward 36). Nor does Shaw want the Centre for Fine Woodworking labelled as a Krenovian school. A 2011 trip to North America during which he visited Inside Passage School of Fine Cabinetmaking and re-visited College of the Redwoods confirmed that

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55 James Krenov died in 2009 at the age of 88 (College “Remembering”).
56 Inside Passage in British Columbia, Canada, was founded by Robert Van Norman. Its website is clear about its influences: “Our school and its programs are founded on and dedicated to the teachings of James Krenov” (Inside Passage).
the CFW does not conform to a mould. However, a look at the CFW newsletters and student blog reveals attributes of Shaw’s experience in California. There are photographs of parties, a celebratory cake and barbecue for the CFW’s 5th anniversary, and the ritual burning of mockups (Chamfer). The latter is acknowledged as a custom straight from the annals of the Redwoods. Such activities build the collegiality that is necessary in a discipline requiring extra hands (for glue-ups), extra bodies (for lifting or after-hours workshop safety) and tension release. Unlike an academic discipline where a student spends time in a group as well as alone, woodworking instruction is always with others. Bonding facilitates cordial interaction and constructive production.

As time passes, the Centre’s reputation and outreach attract renowned international visitors to Nelson. These visits are beneficial opportunities for students—both CFW and outside—but, unlike the Krenov, Peters and Carpenter visits to New Zealand, the exposure is not nationwide. The expense of workshops conducted at the CFW is recouped by fees that prohibit the standing-room-only numbers for the former 1980s visitors, and the Centre is justified in recovering its costs. But it is unfortunate that the enthusiasm generated by such instructors is limited, since only those who are in the CFW network hear about them. When visitors were sponsored by the QEII Arts Council, the British Council or Fulbright programme, they toured. Now, Creative New Zealand’s lead time for applications and distant relationship with applicants precludes CNZ as a source of funds. Increasing reliance on regional and private sponsorship means that energies are directed locally and wider-reaching national initiatives are rare.

Efforts to break down the insularity can be frustrating. Shaw described a collaboration between FITEC (page 132) and the CFW, whereby a project was developed to address one of the National Standard units that furniture apprentices must fulfil. However, this was an isolated incident: “I have got six business cards from people employed by FITEC who’ve come to see us or we’ve run across . . . . Everyone thinks that what we’re doing is wonderful . . . . and we never hear from them again.” Shaw says he would “love to be part of” a wider reform of woodwork education:

What I see happening in schools is that the woodworking teaching is marginal in terms of quality, and expectations are going through the roof in terms of what the students should achieve. Design outcomes are also part of the programme and as soon as you put design outcomes in place without skill, you get very complex ideas that you have to find the

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57 These include: in 2008, Mike Davies, a British carver (now resident in Auckland); in 2009, Darryl Kiel, an American veneering expert, Jon Brooks, an American furniture maker, and Kenji Suda, a prospective Japanese National Treasure in woodworking; and in 2012 Silas Kopf, an American marquetry expert.

58 Fees for Mike Davies’ 2009 carving workshop were NZ$695 for four days and $375 for the first two introductory days (CFW “2009”).
simplest solution to produce. And it doesn’t actually work to build skill or confidence with the material. So there are lots of problems: taking the projects, redesigning them, putting [in] the opportunity for the students to get excited by what they’re making because it’s contemporary in nature, it’s not a 1950s mirror that’s been plucked out of some woodworking book . . . .

But unless action-oriented authorities come to him, Shaw is content to work with like-minded and enthusiastic colleagues.

John Shaw’s training was based in tradition. The years at NMIT allowed the dissemination of the tradition albeit with the constraints imposed by an academic institution’s standardised curriculum and accountability. The Centre for Fine Woodworking permits a full-blown indulgence in tradition as interpreted by Shaw, Haig and their tutors. The tradition is also manifest in the furniture that originates in its tutors and students. I will now look at John Shaw’s furniture and community presence, bearing in mind that the act of making is not mutually exclusive from the act of teaching.

Teaching by Making

The teaching took its toll—“What is suffering most is my own work. I’m having to sacrifice as far as the amount of time I can give to it” (J. Shaw “John Shaw: Furniture” 30)—yet Shaw was visible in the New Zealand furniture scene during its heyday and beyond. In order to be seen regularly he relied on recycling his work—sending the same piece to several exhibitions. He took advantage of the, mostly, discrete audiences of North and South Islands. While Shaw’s output was not robust, we will look in a moment at the other fruits of his labours.

Though the work may be thin on the ground, it frequently was acclaimed. In 1987 Shaw’s furniture was published in the New Zealand Listener, a national magazine that, in addition to listing weekly radio and television schedules, contained quality writing about a wide range of topics. The article accompanying the small image of a writing desk and chair (Figure 167) stated that the desk had won the 1987 Suter Craft Award (Gibbs “Intricate”). Gibbs noted that the desk 59 was made while Shaw was studying with Krenov—this information would have validated the Arts Council’s grant to Shaw as

![Figure 167. John Shaw, Fall-flap Desk and Chair, 1984. Chestnut and oak; detail of opened desk.](image)

The simplicity of the wall cabinet shows the influence of the teacher under whom it was made. The visible tenons on the drawers provide pattern and colour that harmonise with the handcrafted pulls. James Krenov emphasised ‘making a piece your own’ by means of carved details such as drawer and door pulls. Dovetail joints, an indication of best woodworking construction, can be seen at the junctions at top and bottom of the carcass. At left, the desk and chair are shown in the owners’ setting surrounded by a collection of carved spoons by Levi Borgstrom. While the majority of the furniture in this thesis has been photographed in a studio or gallery, its true place is in a home. Only there can its function and aesthetics be verified.

59 The chair is not described by Gibbs but is listed on Shaw’s Index application (J. Shaw CV). The materials are oak and seagrass “to a design by Vidar Malmsten” (J. Shaw CV). Vidar Malmsten was the son of Carl Malmsten, James Krenov’s Swedish teacher (College “James”). A furniture blogger notes that this chair has been made by “numerous” College of the Redwoods students (Crosby).
well as being of interest to Krenov’s many admirers. But it also served to connect a prize with a tutor at Nelson Polytechnic. In other words, if you enrolled at NMIT you were being tutored by a winner.

The article pointed out that Shaw was one of six woodworkers selected for the controversial Index of Craftspeople (page 62). It will be recalled that one of the criticisms that selectors levelled at the submissions for the first intake of the Index was that slide quality was poor. Shaw’s overseas experience had acquainted him with what was required; he demonstrated this standard as well as being able to pass it on to students, as can be seen on the CFW website.

Shaw participated in five Alternative Furniture Shows. His booth was sparser than those of the full-time makers (Figure 168), yet he supported the community by his presence. In 1986 he sent a small cabinet to the National Invitational Woodwork Exhibition at Compendium in Auckland (Figure 169). Vic Matthews described it as “a very delicate piece” and “Japanese Krenov in concept,” and concluded, “it is the precision and care taken with detail, that gives John’s pieces such an air of authority” (Matthews “Compendium”). When the cabinet travelled around the South Island as part of About Wood (1989-1991) it attracted the attention of the Editor of The New Zealand Woodworker: “hand-made paper door panels and deceptively simple lines, [this] was the piece that kept pulling back the knowledgeable visitors. Wood-worker’s woodwork, a tactile as well as a visual pleasure” (Macpherson “About” 10).

Community involvement was substantial at this time. Shaw was one of the instigators of the Furniture Group and was a successful entrant (Figure 170) in the Contemporary Furniture Show, a collaboration between the Furniture Group and the Auckland Museum in 1988. Following the opening of that exhibition, George Ingram, the Museum Show’s judge, gave a one-day workshop at Carrington Technical Institute that Shaw attended. In the same year Shaw taught a workshop with Colin Slade at Christchurch Polytechnic (“Guilds, Clubs” 8), and in 1990 submitted “a low table of quiet but assertive form” (Slade “Canterbury”) to the Canterbury Guild’s National Invited Exhibition. In 1989 Shaw’s Waratah Cabinet was shown again, in The Human Touch, the exhibit that showcased the makers selected for the Index of New Zealand Craftworkers.
With Quiver II, Shaw took part in Framed (Figure 171). His piece is unusual in that its wood component is minimal, and for this reason, it seems insubstantial. Humphrey Ikin told me that the jurying process for Framed asked for photographic submissions and those selected were given free rein in what they could make (Personal 2011). The exhibition presented an opportunity for Shaw to show his experiments with wood, linen thread and wire that first appeared at the Suter Gallery in Nelson. Quiver II was one of a series of three that explored tension. They are anomalies in the Shaw portfolio. Another in the series, Phalanx, was shown at the Suter in 1998. Shaw participated in all five of the Suter shows with Side Table in 2000 (recipient of the Overall Winner) and a Hall Table in 2002.

Subsequently he has had commissions (Figure 172) for various Nelson venues—the Visitor Centre, the airport, the cathedral—and private clients. In 2008 Shaw told me that he has not missed making, that

Figure 170. John Shaw, Waratah Cabinet. Andaman padauk, ebony (1m in height) (left)
The cabinet is named “waratah” because of its Y forms resembling steel fence posts, common in New Zealand and Australia, marketed under the brand name Waratah. The cabinet has adjustable shelves to accommodate objects of varying heights. When it appeared in the Human Touch exhibition, Amy Brown described it as “charming” (page 112).

Figure 171. John Shaw, Quiver II. European beech, stainless steel, linen thread (centre); Phalanx. Oak, Canadian rock maple (right)
Shaw states on his website that these pieces spring from his fascination with bows and arrows. Intended as display furniture, they provide precarious surfaces for precious objects in an earthquake-prone country. Both designs are minimal with perfect assembly techniques so that construction is forgotten and form takes precedence. Quiver II and Phalanx are domestic-inspired sculpture or “art furniture”.

With Quiver II, Shaw took part in Framed (Figure 171). His piece is unusual in that its wood component is minimal, and for this reason, it seems insubstantial. Humphrey Ikin told me that the jurying process for Framed asked for photographic submissions and those selected were given free rein in what they could make (Personal 2011). The exhibition presented an opportunity for Shaw to show his experiments with wood, linen thread and wire that first appeared at the Suter Gallery in Nelson. Quiver II was one of a series of three that explored tension. They are anomalies in the Shaw portfolio. Another in the series, Phalanx, was shown at the Suter in 1998. Shaw participated in all five of the Suter shows with Side Table in 2000 (recipient of the Overall Winner) and a Hall Table in 2002.

Subsequently he has had commissions (Figure 172) for various Nelson venues—the Visitor Centre, the airport, the cathedral—and private clients. In 2008 Shaw told me that he has not missed making, that

Figure 172. John Shaw & Mike Hindmarsh, Benches (two locations), Visitor’s Centre, Nelson
The image at left was taken not long after the benches’ installation. Now, the wood is weathered: it blends with the concrete but is less inviting. On a recent visit, chalked graffiti on the concrete emphasised ageing and seeming neglect.

Dining Table & Chairs, 2002. Ash, American cherry, leather (right)
A commission for a private fishing lodge. Rather than repeat previous designs, Shaw is willing to try new ones as evidenced in these dining chairs. The backs and lower rails are markedly different than in Figure 163.
the discipline required to make is instead applied to teaching and management. Yet in 2010 he showed a walnut and matai desk (Figure 173) at the CFW exhibition at COCA that demonstrated he still has ‘the right stuff’: “It’s like riding bicycles I suppose. You never forget how to do it and every so often you jump on the bike and go for a ride and you think, ah, this is great. Get the wind in your hair. Get the shavings down your underpants.”

To conclude this section, I will discuss the products of Shaw’s not making: his pedagogical legacy. Since his primary role is as an educator, the transference of skills and philosophy is seen in Shaw’s students and their work.

Teaching Legacy

The students who enrol for John Shaw’s classes are exposed to the English Arts and Crafts legacy. They are also exposed to what is known as the Krenovian legacy. Shaw and I had an interchange about what this was:

DW: There’s certainly a Krenovian aesthetic to the work that I saw. I don’t mean that in a [pause]
JS: Yah, I know, I know. What is that? Whaddaya reckon it is?
DW: It’s just the cleanliness, the no-nonsense, the, well, the Scandinavian.
JS: Exactly. You see, you see, it isn’t. See, Krenovian is really easy to say but in actual fact James Krenov came out of the Scandinavian movement. Which was a response to modernism. And so it is, I think it’s possibly Krenovian in the attitude to detailing and understatement. Which is, which is fine but, yah. I don’t mind, I don’t mind. I think the students get an enormous amount out of being able to link themselves. Even if it’s just through using one of my planes or using a plane that Jim gave me [Figure 174]. They use them. They realise that they’re just the same as the ones they make but there’s a tradition

Figure 173. John Shaw, Walnut and Matai Desk and Chair, 2010; detail
The desk attracted attention at COCA because the slight curve in the top—a design that ‘wraps’ around the sitter—had prompted placement of drawers at the ends. At bottom right, Shaw shows his desk at the opening (I am in the red jacket at left). Visitors enjoyed being able to touch and, to some degree, sit in the furniture; this replicated the Alternative Furniture Shows of the 1980s and early 1990s. Colin Slade, who launched the AFS, opened the exhibition. For an installation photograph of the entire exhibition, see Figure 19.
there and there was a big-shot in the tradition at one point who redefined woodworking for a lot of people.60

The aim—and a conscientious teacher would be remiss if the result was otherwise—is not to produce clones. Shaw stated: “In a learning environment that is established to facilitate fine woodwork, you’ve got aesthetic support and the opportunity to develop fine skills. Those opportunities often come with an associated aesthetic (as Krenov’s school did) but once you have gained confidence from being in that environment you’ve got to move on and become your own person” (Nathan). Given that the CFW is still in its infancy, graduates have not been in the field long enough to show evidence of ‘becoming your own person.’ Perhaps by 2020, individuality will be more evident amongst the persevering makers.

Currently, within the context of the CFW curriculum, Shaw prioritises design to meet a need, over design that is “innovation for marketing.” He makes the division, here, between functional design and design that is about added value—a perception that has been pervasive in New Zealand (“CEO”).61 His teaching of furniture-making practice does not include ‘point of difference’ branding that he believes originated with the redirection of national education toward the hybridisation of visual arts, product design and craft: “Those are the sorts of values that the design schools promote—innovation, in terms of use of materials and in terms of form . . . and in terms of solutions to problems.” At the CFW, design tools such as drawing, model-making and prototyping are taught in a way that is integral to the piece of work being constructed. Refinement by means of a number of strategies is intended to promote an ethos of not being easily satisfied; at the same time the design outcome is personal and satisfying rather than

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60 I include the unedited transcript here because Shaw is grappling with the Krenov association. The tenet of creative originality is deep-seated and insinuation of copying or plagiarism is anathema to professionalism.

61 From an introduction to a CEO Summit in 2010 under the auspices of New Zealand Trade & Enterprise: “Design integrated companies have evolved to be fundamentally different from other businesses. They create stronger and more appealing products and services, they inspire their people through fostering a dynamic organisational culture, they collaborate to turn their ideas into reality and they create loyal and passionate customers who are willing to pay a price premium. Companies that embed design create new opportunities, new markets and new value” (“CEO”).
competitive and distinctive. Shaw’s goal is to “get people designing without knowing it,” to be relaxed and have fun with discovering the “holy grail” of line, form, proportion, balance, etcetera. The principles of design can be taught but they need years before they become second nature.

Response to the student work is gratifying—the annual Kawerau Woodskills Festival attests to the high caliber of design and making (Figure 100) emanating from Shaw and Haig’s classes. But Kawerau participation is not only about winning prizes:

It’s a very valuable environment for the promotion of the school . . . also it’s really, really valuable for the students to put their work in and receive unsolicited feedback. It’s very easy to go up to people and say, ‘whaddaya think?’ But when you stick your work out there—you don’t know who the judges are and all that sort of stuff and it’s just good for the students.

As for a future for his students, Shaw put it this way:

That’s the missing thing at the moment—selling work. These guys are all ready and there’s time for a strategy to be developed. And if it’s not gonna work in New Zealand, then everyone should just step straight over the top of the New Zealand market and find somewhere overseas where they can work and go.

The Centre for Fine Woodworking is expanding, thanks to a trust and private donor. And while Shaw, Haig et alia can continue to transmit the tradition and the standards, ultimate success depends on reception in the local market. An example is seen in Nigel Whitton, who could be said to be one of the CFW’s star graduates. Whitton came to the Centre with extensive experience as a shipwright and boat builder and completed the nine-month course in 2007. He established NW Designs, in hopes of making furniture after ‘graduation,’ but undertook a contract in Australia for Sir Richard Branson’s catamaran, replacing the crew accommodation and installing portions of guest accommodation. When childbirth necessitated settling on dry land, he and his wife returned Nelson where he pursues his practice (Whitton NW). Whitton’s Go-Dining Table (Figure 175) topped the popular vote in the Rare Creations Furniture Exhibition staged by Andreas Niemann at Seifried Winery in 2008. Currently he is working on furniture for a large winery, display storage for a high-end store, and a chair for super yachts (Whitton “Re: CFW”).

Figure 175. Nigel Whitton, Go-Dining Table; Wing Back Chair
Both of these pieces were made at the CFW. Whitton’s Wing Back Chair has the Krenovian aesthetic yet incorporates a unique detail. The back splats, which show off the grain of the salinga, are not rigid. The sitter is aware of movement as the panels flex in reaction to pressure from the torso. Go-Dining Table, the last piece completed during Whitton’s student days, is made of American ash and European beech. Whitton told Australian Wood Review (Dover) that the establishment of NW Designs permitted him to rent bench space and use woodworking machinery to other woodworkers. In anticipation of this possibility he purchased equipment via online auctions and was readily able to set up premises when the time came.

62 “Adam Webb and Tony Clark are students at Nelson’s Centre for Fine Woodworking and between them they captured all three prizes in the Furniture and Cabinetmaking section of the 2009 Kawerau Woodfest” (Anderson).
63 In the April 2010 CFW Newsletter was an announcement of approval by Canterbury Community Trust of an application for workshop improvements (Centre). Later, in January 2011: “We were thrilled to learn recently that the trustees of the Dick Roberts estate have awarded us a very generous gift . . . it will give us great pleasure to honour him by improving our workshop and student environment within the Centre” (Centre “Newsletter” January 2011).
64 I attended the Exhibition.
While Nigel Whitton represents John Shaw’s aesthetic and technical lineage, Phil Osborne (Figure 176) represents the translation of information because of mutual interest. Tradition is not solely manifest in objects but in the transference of values; the longevity of tradition is dependent on individuals who see the merit of the values. Osborne studied at NMIT, beginning in 1989 (he was 27), taking a three-month foundation course. When it came time to enrol for full-time study, the course was under the umbrella of Visual Arts. Nevertheless, he specialised in furniture under Shaw and became heavily involved in the furniture community. After graduation, he did work experience with Humphrey Ikin, David Trubridge, and Kazu Nakagawa and was influenced by the design thinking of Greg Bloomfield and Jimu Grimmett. He batch-produced small tables and marketed them personally throughout New Zealand, consolidating networks and seeing exhibitions. He had an insatiable interest in the studio furniture community in New Zealand and may well have attended more exhibitions and visited more practitioners than any other individual.

In 1996, as a freelance curator, he inaugurated the first of five biennial furniture exhibitions held at the Suter Gallery in Nelson. Osborne saw these as a regular excuse for artists to make and display new work, and an opportunity to “educate the public regarding the different intentions of makers in craft art, one-off or batch production” (Osborne Personal 2). Movement, Gathering Momentum, the Weyerhaeuser Studio Furniture Awards (2000 and 2002) and Home Grown drew public attention to furniture, albeit to regional makers. Grants were forthcoming from the Creative Communities Scheme, under the umbrella of Creative New Zealand (“Creative”), and Weyerhaeuser’s sponsorship was of financial and prestigious benefit.

Gathering Momentum was staged under the auspices of the Nelson Furniture Collective, another Osborne initiative, that grew out of the enthusiasm generated by Movement and the exhibitors’ desire to sustain the energy. The Collective linked professionals and students and all came together not only to make work but to organise the shows with Osborne in charge. Sadly, the Collective foundered for several reasons—no-one wanted to relieve Osborne from having to sacrifice six months, every two years, to spearhead the exhibitions; Weyerhaeuser sponsorship was withdrawn; and because the Collective was inclusive of all materials, the wood-focused makers turned their allegiance to the Nelson Guild. But,
while it lasted, it was an entity that brought recognition to furniture.

Osborne taught at NMIT and the Centre for Fine Woodworking, as well as making commissions and submitting work for exhibition. But his contribution to the woodworking community is his curation and advocacy of the importance of public displays of furniture. He also deserves acknowledgement for another significant role: without his encouragement and his accumulation of archives, this thesis would not exist. In the furniture tradition tree, it could be said: Malmsten ⇒ Krenov ⇒ Shaw ⇒ Osborne ⇒ me.

Alternatively seeing the legacy in this way, John Shaw believes tradition is entrenched not in himself but in the Centre for Fine Woodworking. The Centre's establishment and continuity challenge the prevailing educational opposition to craft in New Zealand. The 2010 COCA exhibition served to show what is possible outside the system. Shaw knows from personal experience that when you are inside the system you have to bat for it. Being outside, yet strongly embedded in a tradition that extends back to ancient civilisations, is a secure foundation from which to be an effective and forthright teacher.

My motivation and my desire to see change is fundamentally driven by the value that I think certain people get out of woodworking. I know what woodworking can be. For certain people. And trying to create as many opportunities as possible for people who may have that scope within them to get excited by woodworking, to encounter woodworking, is a fundamental motivation. And one of the solutions is the Centre for Fine Woodworking.

John Shaw is part of a continuum of practice that he perpetuates through woodwork education. By means of training and experience, whether they be initiates envisioning a career or retirees working in backyard sheds, Shaw's pupils sustain that continuum of practice and transference of values. Innovation, the essence of most design education, displaces continuity with newness, sacrificing the values that have accrued with tradition. Wendy Neale, the next case study, is doing innovative work without disposing of furniture-making heritage.

The Woman: Wendy Neale

Craft is made by women or working class people. Design is made by creative, white collar men (Neale quoted in Robertson 68).

This statement is a fairly accurate explanation of why, in fine art and design circles, the status of craft is what it is. Craft is a pejorative attribution to creative activity, and in New Zealand craft has remained outside the purview of the fine arts. Some craft communities are trying to change this perception: Craft Scotland took advantage of the negative connotations of ‘craft’ by mounting an advertising campaign called “The C Word.” The double entendre offended some makers and audience members, whereas others welcomed the barb and humour that the marketing logo contained. The ribaldry and contemporaneity of “The C Word” campaign boosted recognition for craftspeople in Scotland as well as attracting the attention of international craft communities to its usefulness.

The above statement was made by Wendy Neale (Figure 177), the next of my case studies. Neale was responding to a question about the relationship between craft, design and art posed by a reporter for World Sweet World, a New Zealand how-to crafts magazine (Robertson). The quotation is not just a glib answer to a complicated question, but a philosophical stance that is evident in Neale's work and lifestyle. Neale trained as a furniture maker and taught that craft in New Zealand—she is fully qualified to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with her male counterparts both here and overseas. Yet she has made choices that are symbolic ones, that put her within a woman's world of craft.

My labels for my other Case Studies are attributions—advocate, native, outsider, teacher, writer—whereas my label for Neale appears to simply identify her gender, but not entirely. Certainly, she is one

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65 Widely regarded as a leading commentator on New Zealand art and culture, Hamish Keith stated: “…pottery is a craft and the arts and crafts are by their nature distinct. It is necessary to see as separate those activities which satisfy the mundane needs of man and those concerned with his spiritual needs” (33).

66 I interviewed the Chief Executive of Craft Scotland, Emma Walker, in Edinburgh.
of the few female studio furniture makers in this country and is therefore a representative of her gender in that occupation. But she also embodies craft's association with women, and women's association with care. She is the case study that is the best example of the connections between the ethics of care and craft as care. As a female furniture maker, Neale raises a mirror to a predominantly male activity in New Zealand; unlike Bloomfield's mirror, Neale's reflects on the entire studio furniture phenomenon. I begin by looking at Neale's career, including her early making.

Making a Place in a Male Profession

Neale cannot remember a time when she was not making. The women in her family, while she grew up in Newlands, an inner suburb of Wellington, sewed, crocheted and knitted. Her father and grandfather had a shed and she has “quite early memories of playing with planes and things like that.”67 She was comfortable with the traditions of both genders: she made balsa wood furniture for her dolls (Robertson 67). In intermediate school she liked cooking, sewing, woodwork and metalwork but did not pursue creative studies at high school. It was not until her early twenties that the purchase of a half-size 1950s Bedford school bus provoked enrolment in a carpentry course. The previous owner had started to fit out the bus as a dwelling and, to complete the job, Neale did a pre-apprenticeship foundation in woodwork. Being in the bench room was a reminder of the pleasure of her father's shed.

While living in and working on the bus, Neale was picking and pruning grapes. Then in 1990, when employment opportunities gradually diminished, Neale was forced to try to live on a youth unemployment benefit. When this proved impossible she borrowed money and flew to Tasmania where she readily found a job as a social services trainer and support worker. Her spare time was occupied in “making things” to the degree that friends suggested she go to school to enhance her making. Her response was, “Study? I'm not interested in going to university or anything. . . . I'd always had the feeling that I was much better at learning by doing, alongside people, and my imagination of tertiary study was that you'd always be sitting down writing.” Neale's friend, a shrewd woman, cut-and-pasted a pamphlet that described an art, craft and design diploma at the Hobart Institute of TAFE.68 Even though Neale was persuaded by the fact that the programme was “89% practical and 11% writing” and enrolled, she skipped the writing and did not finish the diploma.

The Hobart course lasted two years during which Neale attended classes in woodworking, jewellery making and occupational health and safety. Her final woodworking piece, Gather, was a bar stool with a laminated back (Figure 178): it signals an ongoing interest in fashion's form, in décolletage, pinched waists, bustles, and flounces. At the same time she was fostering children and when the modules were completed she decided she needed a year without responsibilities. She went to Perth, supporting herself with part-time jobs, and continued to “make stuff.” In her studio she made boxes

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67 All quotations come from my 2010 interview with Neale.
68 An acronym in widespread use in Australia that stands for Technical and Further Education.
—“I’ve always been really obsessed with boxes, and opening and closing”—and submitted them for exhibition. Neale laughed at her naivety: “I was so frightened, I didn’t go to the exhibition opening. I found that terrifying. And then when I went to pick up my things I saw there were red dots on them and I thought that was a bad mark or something.” She was relieved to learn that the red dots meant the work had been sold.

Before going to Western Australia, Neale applied to the School of Art at the University of Tasmania and was accepted. She returned to Hobart in 1998 and enrolled for the three-year programme. This time she overcame her fear of writing by taking introductory courses offered by Student Services: “I actually discovered that theory wasn’t as terrifying as I suspected.” In addition to having a scholarship for women in non-traditional disciplines that paid for fees, she worked part-time.

Neale was fortunate in the tutors she encountered at the University. Kevin Perkins, mentioned previously in this thesis, was one; the others were John Smith and Patrick Stronach, the latter a graduate of John Makepeace’s Parnham College. Neale was unaware of Perkins’ visit to New Zealand when she was 15; it was purely serendipitous that her study in Tasmania coincided with such expertise: “I think they’d [Perkins and Smith] been involved in the course for maybe twenty, twenty-five years at that stage but still could look at each person’s work really freshly.” With this support and the abundance of Tasmanian timber with which to experiment, she concentrated on wood while dabbling in metal, plastic and upholstery to lesser degrees.

Neale described the finale of her furniture studies: “I’d had enough experience throughout that course that if they said make a ‘something,’ I would have a go at making two or three.” Experimentation on a number of iterations produced pieces that had connections to each other and, ultimately, a body of work that was cohesive. Even though there were “landmark pieces,” they tied together. The graduate exhibition at the Long Gallery in Hobart, the arrangement and administration of which was student-driven, was personally gratifying: “I still look back now and see the progression, themes within my furniture that come through.” She articulated the themes as follows:

A female style or a feminine style, but I resist trying to define that—what is a feminine style? I seem to do curves, whether that’s metal or wood I always like to have some sort of shaped curve in my work but, on the other hand, if I’m just working with something really square or boxy then I tend to have a big focus on the details: the joins and the contrasting timbers or little details. And I’ve got a huge interest in surface and texture. . . . I suppose in some ways the feminine might be (which had inverted commas) the interest in fabric and playing with

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69 Parnham College, initially the John Makepeace School for Craftsmen in Wood (page 90), was established in 1976. During its 24 years, the College trained significant furniture makers and “contributed significantly to a revival of the crafts in Britain and overseas, particularly in design and furniture-making (“John Makepeace”). Makepeace continues to make and exhibit furniture.

70 Neale refers to Kevin Perkins’ label for one-of-a-kind pieces that differ from batch production.
fabric and maybe treating timber in that way with burl veneers—you’ve got a visual texture—or a ripple fiddleback veneer.

Evidence of what Neale calls ‘feminine’ is seen in two cabinets from the years of her production work (Figure 179). She takes advantage of the chatoyance of the kauri and the bird’s-eye figure in the poplar; by placing the extra-ordinary features of the wood in the foreground, its natural three-dimensional illusions are the cabinets’ decoration. In addition to the visual texture, New Zealand Cabinet includes (wo)man-made texture juxtaposed with the natural. But rather than being feminine, Neale’s exploitation of natural idiosyncrasies coincides with the sanctity in which Cooke’s first generation of furniture makers (14), like Tage Frid, Sam Maloof and George Nakashima, held timber. She is beholden in these cabinets to a woodworking legacy that certainly would have been passed down through her Australian teachers. Instead of being based in gender, the selection and positioning of boards to best display the wood’s figure is better described as attention to detail and care with the material.

When Neale reached the end of the Bachelor of Fine Arts programme she was awarded the Undergraduate Prize and given the option of continuing her scholarship into an honours year. But New Zealand called in two ways: firstly, having been away from home for ten years, Neale wanted to spend time with her grandmother before it was too late; and secondly, Martin Wenzel, who initiated the furniture programme at UCOL in Palmerston North was leaving. Neale was hired in 2001 as the Furniture Design Lecturer and Course Coordinator, quite a senior position for a recent graduate. Over the next two years she acquitted duties that required her to work a sixty- to seventy-hour week.

By the time Neale arrived at UCOL, the programme had been running for three years; the first year certificate level was in good shape but the second year diploma had only been offered once. Neale developed the diploma, rewrote the curriculum, created a range of project briefs that accorded with teaching outcomes, and built up resources. Until her arrival, no-one had invested time in stocking the library with appropriate books and magazines, and Neale “went crazy.” She delivered the diploma course while Andy Halewood concentrated on the certificate; the pair also raised the profile of the courses by means of exhibitions and public events. Once the diploma course was written and functioning to her satisfaction, Neale was able to prepare her own work for exhibition.

After two years Neale was ready to move on. Her partner was unwilling to tolerate the flatness

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71 When I visited UCOL in 2008 Halewood took me to a student exhibit staged adjacent to a public thoroughfare in central Palmerston North.
and weather of Palmerston North any longer, and the commitment to teaching and administration meant that creativity got perfunctory attention. The decision was made to move to Waiheke Island and concentrate on furniture. Departure from UCOL was without remorse: “[I left] with this really strong sense of satisfaction that there was a whole lot of written material that someone could pick up and get a sense of.” Her replacement could readily go in the direction Neale prescribed—class plans with lists of resources and outlines were clearly laid out—or individualise the curriculum within broad learning outcomes. Neale had been close enough to Wellington to assist in her grandmother’s care and could leave the area with a sense of having fulfilled her duties.

The years in Palmerston North acquainted Neale with the New Zealand furniture community. She met Phil Osborne in his capacity on the advisory committee for furniture at UCOL; Osborne invited her to be guest artist and awards selector for the Weyerhaeuser Furniture Awards exhibition in 2002, thereby connecting her with the Nelson makers. As a course coordinator, Neale made contact with ventures such as Cicada Studios, David Trubridge’s ‘incubator’ for young makers in Hastings. And when she got to Waiheke, Ingrid Verdonk, who had been an intern at Cicada, invited her to be part of a makers’ group to which Kazu Nakagawa and Paul Rhind belonged. Neale stated: “We didn’t spend a lot of time as a group together but what we did was set up the design/make exhibitions at the community gallery.”

Neale built up a workshop on Waiheke and focused on being a furniture designer and maker. She did commissions—dining tables, desks, cabinets—most of which were for Island residents, and had a range of items that she marketed in galleries in Auckland, Rotorua, Taupo, Palmerston North and Napier. Various series of lights, small cabinets, boxes, and jewellery chests (Figure 180) were bread-and-butter production. Sculpture permitted Neale to tap into her fine art training, and she took delight in doing a series of miniature dresses (Figure 181), crocheted with copper wire that could then be manipulated into desired shapes. Despite their being “really satisfying” she had to curtail the crochet because it was too hard on her wrists. She also entered sculpture exhibitions such as New Zealand Sculpture Onshore in 2004 (Figure 182).

![Figure 180. Wendy Neale, Frock Cabinet, 1999. Silky oak veneer (exterior), celery top pine timber and veneer (interior), acrylic light box; detail](image)

Aluminium Light, 1998 (centre); Stainless Steel Light, 2002 (right)

Aluminium Light was made while Neale was a student; Stainless Steel Light, created in Palmerston North, continued the aesthetic. Frock Cabinet was part of Neale’s output as a BFA student, and aligns with her description of feminine style—curves, reference to female garments in the title, the teasing slit between the doors that echoes the central light’s shape. Frock Cabinet displays a distinctive individual style that could have been sustained in her later career, yet manufacture of speculative large pieces is financially prohibitive. She had to rely on smaller objects to make a living as a maker.

72 A residential island in the Hauraki Gulf accessible by ferry from Auckland.
73 The first, Design/Make: Seated, took place at the Waiheke Community Art Gallery in 2006. I used the second, Design/Make: Table, in 2007 as a design project for my Interior Design students at the Waikato Institute of Technology. One of the students’ tables was accepted for exhibition as was my entry. Design/Make: Sideboard was held in 2008 and Design/Make: Sunlounger in 2010 (Waiheke).
She was barely able to support herself—“I think in my last year I earned twenty grand or something which means, you know, seven”—and took on additional part-time jobs. One of these was at the School of Design at Unitec where she lectured at the certificate and diploma levels. After three years on Waiheke Island the ‘manufacturing’ began to pall: “I found that the need to make money from furniture actually meant that I was making things that I wasn’t excited about. I was doing bread-and-butter pieces and I’d lost my excitement about making things and I’d also gotten to a point where I wasn’t sure that the world needed more objects. I’d lost that sense of design or craft being important as such.”

Although there were aspects of the lifestyle—growing vegetables, collecting your own water, being environmentally conscious—that were desirable, the market-driven career went against the grain. This realisation, coincident with the ending of her partnership, prompted Neale’s decision to return to Wellington.

Relocation to the city where she grew up has been ideal—“I know that I’m better at living in the city and visiting the country rather than the other way around.” The geography is familiar yet Wellington’s character has changed since the 1980s. Neale lives centrally and says the city is more cosmopolitan than it was previously. She was hired in 2006 as a Technical Demonstrator in Design at the Institute of Design for Industry and Environment at Massey University. The job, providing workshop support to undergraduate and postgraduate students and academic staff, is nine-to-five and Neale consciously elected that level of involvement: “I saw it as an opportunity to have a job and my creativity as being connected but separate.” This is one of the few full-time positions she has held in her career and its benefits have been greater than just a steady income. She was able to begin a part-time Masters’ degree shortly after joining Massey and graduated, with distinction, in 2010.

Enrolment for a Master of Design was a significant opportunity. It allowed Neale to take “a deep
big look at my practice and how I wanted to frame it with thoughts about sustainability and consumerism.” This mid-career re-view of her practice is what I will now examine in an effort to explain why Wendy Neale and her creative output reflect on the entire studio furniture phenomenon.

Practicing Against the (Masculine) Grain

Despite its ideological underpinnings—made by hand, under the maker’s control, minimal planetary impact—craft is still burdened with an undeniably negative fact. Its practitioners make ‘things’ that add to the abundance that already exists. Objects from generations past, some of which are still serviceable, are discarded because they are no longer in fashion or desired, slightly damaged, or replaced by the ‘new and improved.’ A craftsperson functions within this system: she or he benefits when a dining table, which was serviceable ‘while the kids were growing up,’ is perceived to be an aesthetic embarrassment. A craftsperson also benefits in a culture of gift exchange—the handmade gift signifies more than its form or function. But does the maker’s aforementioned ideology justify making a living by manufacturing things?

There are few self-employed makers who can engage in such philosophical quandaries. Neale’s attempt at self-employment on Waiheke sowed doubts about the designer/maker role; her employment by Massey University and the Master of Design thesis permitted consideration of those doubts and their resolution. Her current practice is a successful marriage of making and not making, and it contributes to the discussion of alternatives in which some craft practitioners are currently involved.

On the first page of her thesis, “An Embarrassment of Riches,” Neale asks herself several questions that are pertinent to every conscious designer and maker on the planet: “How [can I] be a designer when I think that the world has already enough things? How can I go about creating more, when I think there’s plenty already? What do I do with myself, my skills, my sensibilities?” (1) These questions were not central to her ambitions in her early days of furniture-making. When she returned to New Zealand after art school, she says, “I was very much interested in finding a niche that involved some level of fame so that people bought my work.” She tried that, but now realizes she was not truly comfortable with that goal. Yes, the design training lead to her present employment, “but it is quite different than what I initially imagined. In writing my thesis I did definitely find that the thread of my life since adulthood has been to be a hippie, not thinking about having lots of money, just thinking about having a good life and a wholesome, to some degree, life. To my standards. In some ways, setting myself up as a furniture maker making objects and selling them was like a tangent.”

Reflection on her practice enabled Neale to see that making and marketing objects was not fulfilling nor was it in her character; in addition, it was ethically inexcusable in terms of her ethos of sustainability. But was total relinquishment warranted? Neale answered herself: “I neither want to stop making things, nor consider myself exempt from the ecological results” (1). The drive to ‘make stuff,’ as her biography points out, permeated her life; the design and crafting gave enjoyment to her and its recipients. So how was it possible to make things—buying materials, incurring studio costs, earning a living—without being in standard economic relationships?

Tony Fry posits that we need to question the very systems we take for granted. Each year, for instance, automobile designers churn out new versions of ‘car’ instead of querying public and private transport and our compulsion to travel (“Sacred I” 191). Neale’s making, of late, is representative of such radical shifts in thinking. She has not been required to re-think her ethics—they were well entrenched.

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75 From Neale’s thesis: “The idiom ‘embarrassment of riches’ was used by art historian, Simon Schama to describe the effect that increased production had on 16th and 17th century Dutch. This phrase struck a chord with me as it seems relevant when applied to contemporary society; we have so much material wealth that we throw away useful yet obsolete items” (1).
She has merely brought them forward to imbue her studio furniture. Neale’s making provokes her audience to re-evaluate the basic economic parameters: money, materials, and time.

Money

Neale is in the enviable position of no longer having to make a living by means of tables, cabinets, lamps and boxes: “I don’t need to make money out of [my practice] so therefore it becomes an integral part of my life as part of my sustenance of myself and trying to make the world a better place.” Her job as a technician takes care of necessities and her salary satisfies her. Neale chose a position with a 35-hour week. She could earn more as an academic but the extra income would require further responsibilities including research. She has avoided that anxiety and effectively meets financial obligations.

Neale crafts for personal and social pleasure. The crafting of furniture provides the opportunity for human exchange, not solely for occasions of gift-giving. Instead of paying cash for services like legal assistance or photography for her thesis, Neale is able to trade a custom piece of furniture. She stresses that this is not an organised barter arrangement but ad hoc, where each situation is negotiated afresh as mutual needs require. The result is social capital: value is placed on the service because, for each of the participants, the exchange is an acknowledgement of skill and commitment of time.

None of Neale’s pieces move into the art world; they are never sold, only exchanged. Laundry Table (Figure 183), in its original iteration, appeared out-of-the-blue in the Massey workshop; it was just there, easy to ignore and shunt about. Neale’s intervention raised its status to meeting site, focal point. “Workshop users who had walked past it every day asked where it had come from” (8). Subsequently Laundry Table was “released back into the world” where its home was negotiated in an exchange for one of the prospective owners’ objects. Neale points out: “These objects are not entertaining; they require work from the viewer. You have to seek an interaction with the object. . . . It does not come to you” (53). As was proposed in the discussion about Greg Bloomfield, Neale is a maverick in the sense that her ‘unorthodox’ works require more concerted audience participation—prospective owners of her work join in the act of creation—but she bypasses the need to be didactic by having individual audience members come to her.

Neale’s studio is the Massey workshop, with permission, after hours, and storage happens at home. The elimination of overhead costs allows money-free exchange beyond the immediate circle. She and friends have taken a booth at the Gay and Lesbian Fair where surplus objects were arrayed on a table and

Figure 183. Wendy Neale, Laundry Table, 2010; detail
Not only has Neale recycled the laundry table, she has found a use for the Melteca/Formica samples (right) that are regularly updated by their company’s travelling representatives. Millions of these samples inhabit resource libraries in architectural and interior design offices in New Zealand alone. They are as durable as the full-size sheets from which they are cut and Neale has created a pattern of samples that provides a usable surface for the table. The table’s metal frame is blemished, attesting to its use and age. Neale’s retention of its imperfections demands that we adjust our expectations for newness and, accept the “patina of age” (Chapman) as a moral ecological choice.

76 Neale is not averse to such systems. She was involved in a system in Hobart called a tool library where, for an annual fee, participants had access to a lawn mower, chain saw, drills. This model minimises mass production.

77 Subsequent to Csikszentmihalyi’s investigations of art objects in homes, he asserted: “By actively appreciating the object, the owner joins in the act of creation, and it is this participation, rather than the artist’s creative effort, that makes the artifact important in his or her life” (“Design” 28).
conversation was the primary coin. There was no hard cash: the price of an object was a story or a poem or, to a lesser degree, another object. In other words, the interaction was of value, not the material.

When the emphasis changes from financial security to financial serenity the psyche shifts. Devaluing money, especially more than one needs, puts a different spin on what it means to practice creatively.

Materials

Neale does not purchase materials. She labels herself as a “gleaner”:

I learned to glean with my parents and grandparents. When I was a child we used to wander through farms and collect mushrooms or pick rosehips as a family. Later, when my politics finally won the battle with my career I lived on communes and I resolved to not buy anything that I did not need. I went to Australia with two friends and we lived for 8 to 10 months, hitchhiking, sleeping outside, and swapping labour for food. So when I became an artist and designer, from the start I was getting my materials in the way I was used to (Neale “Embarrassment” 27).

The furniture she crafts begins as an obsolete object, a discarded item that is no longer desired. Some obsoletes come from the street, some from dumpsters, and others come from friends who think they have found something desirable. Examples include a chair with a broken leg, a step ladder splattered with paint, a charred drawer. The search for obsolete objects is not the ‘cool’ acquisition of retro design: “Gleaning is not a gimmick for me. . . . It’s not a hobby to drive around on inorganic [garbage] day and find stuff” (30). Gleaning is about taking what comes—the origin of the term refers to collecting grain left behind by reapers—and being content that what comes is sufficient and rich.

Each object has a story, whether it be its own or one that is ‘furnished’ during its transformation. For instance, the charred drawer came from a house fire on Waiheke Island: the rest of the chest, along with most of the household’s furniture, did not survive the flames. When Neale saw the blackened pieces grouped on the road for trash collection, she singled out the drawer. To this story she added one of her own. Knowing that this was formerly the top drawer of a chest, Neale recalled her own experiences of top drawers: “my Great Aunt . . . sat at a similar dresser when readying herself for the day or evening or even taking a break during the day. I would watch her and we would talk. She sometimes showed me special things from the top drawer as she went through the rituals of applying powder, brushing her hair, putting on jewellery. . . . The top drawer stirs all my feelings about women looking after
themselves and paying attention to themselves” (49).

Both stories were personal and special, warranting celebration. Gold leaf lining made the drawer precious; placement at eye level put it back to a heightened elevation; an altered orientation made it entirely visible. The Icon Drawer (Figure 184) stands on thin legs and leans against a wall—this structure means that it is still vulnerable, just as memory is. Yet the preservation of the tangible provides access to memories. And they do not solely have to be Neale’s. Each viewer brings their own past to the contemplation of an object.

New materials are avoided. Neale embraces the term “bricolage” which means using the materials that are at hand. The gold leaf for The Icon Drawer was left over from another project. Upholstery fabrics might be discards from a fashion design studio (28); the proximity of student cast-offs at the end of each semester is a bonus of Neale’s employment. Neale’s gleaning is also useful for ‘teaching’ a younger generation:

There was a student who had some tawa left over and he said, do you wanna buy the wood off me? And I went, well I haven’t actually paid for wood for about 15 years, but I tell you what, now that you know how to use a hand plane really well, I’ve got a number four hand plane that I’ve conditioned that I think you’ll really enjoy having. How about we do that? He said, alright, that’d be great! And when it’s money exchanged for material there’s not that light-up, is there?

This episode offered a chance to demonstrate exchange and its enhancing of personal relationships.

Time

Neale’s objects are time intensive. Their evolution is akin to natural birth with periods of gestation, growth, rest and emergence. “I usually live with the objects. I don’t leave them in the workshop; I bring them home and I live with them for a while. I know them” (37). Foregone are the usual processes of furniture-making—sketches, drawing, models—and work takes place directly on an object which, already, has its own integrity. Neale aims to maintain that integrity—“I consider how to design with its history rather than despite its history” (37)—entailing further investment of time: “The process is heuristic, using experience-based techniques of immersion, action, reflection—immersion, reflection, action. I make an intervention on a piece, I stop for coffee and a smoke, I come back and adjust” (2). Time, for

Figure 185. Wendy Neale, Earthquake/Drama Table; details
As instigator of Table, a former school desk has been altered minimally on the exterior. The only apparent change is the addition of a glass porthole that permits the shelterer a view to the outside, to see whether danger has passed. The lens of the porthole is, however, distorted because lack of danger is never clear-cut. Underneath the desk, a wallpaper ‘ceiling’ provides an illusion of security (brick wall) and home (ivy-covered shelter). The shelf for snacks and pastimes is only apparent to those who lower themselves to a normally unobserved aspect of this object.
Neale, is not money.

“It is a slow journey with these unwieldy objects moving through my house and all their ghostly owners” (3). The ghosts are sometimes institutional: Earthquake/Drama Table was formerly a school desk (Figure 185). Its upper surface, laden with notebook, pencil, and eraser, is evocative of almost everyone’s past, yet Neale calls attention to its underside. “At the start of every school year we had earthquake drills, where we rushed to huddle under our desks or to stand in doorways, waiting for the all clear” (50). Putting herself back in time to being under the desk, waiting, the recollection was of almost nothing to do. Part of the intervention for Earthquake/Drama Table was providing a secret cupboard for comic books, games, and treasures to play with. Snacks would also have been welcome long ago; now, small boxes of raisins and “Snifters”—an iconic (and recently retired) New Zealand candy—ease the monotony. Neale has created an inner world both literally and figuratively.

Step Ladder (Figure 186), by its nature, is about time. It was originally used for a number of house painting occasions as evidenced by the drips of different colours that cover its surface. The potency of drips, on a battered ladder, has been kept intact. For Neale it was a reminder of sitting on another step ladder in her Granny’s kitchen, playing with spice containers while chatting about everything and nothing. Transferred to the found ladder, that memory is captured in a treasure drawer hidden under its top step. The drawer is meticulously crafted, in contrast to the state of the ladder; it is a receptacle to honour grannies and kitchens and women’s intimacies over generations. The drawer now houses recipes gathered from friends and significant occasions, further testaments to the richness of time. Since the drawer is not yet full, Neale expects to add to the food memories as years go by.

Neale does not discuss another aspect of Step Ladder—this is the story I bring to it. The ladder takes part in and symbolises the ritual of painting, primarily a masculine activity; the kitchen is women’s domain. The drawer that now encloses female memories is hidden in the male-gendered object. The juxtaposition of opposites creates frisson while alluding to their inseparability. My ‘story’ is added to Neale’s, just as the layers of paint were added to the ladder. And it is the cumulative narrative that accounts for two qualities in Neale’s furniture, identified by Chapman as “alterity” and “cherishability” (74-76).

Alterity is difference while cherishability is love of and care for. Chapman states that different or seemingly independent objects foster relationships “between subject and object [that] are frequently strong and long lasting” (74). The fact that Neale’s objects are obsolete in the first place makes them different; their idiosyncrasy plus the maker’s narrative and physical intervention lay down meanings to which viewers and owners can respond and add. Whereas cherishability is instantly recognisable—‘I love that sofa’—and can be short-lived, narrative sustains the love with which an owner invests an object.
Narrative is the device by which Neale’s care in making becomes care by society. Narrative is also one of the devices by which craft will ensure its future. According to Walter Benjamin, a story “does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (90). Objects that are imbued with stories are retained; the objects plus stories have value to current owners and are, therefore, passed on to next generations. Benjamin even posits that craft and stories are synonymous: “The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work—the rural, the maritime, and the urban—is itself an artisan form of communication. . . . It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (90-91). The craftsperson is a storyteller: a work’s inspiration, its materials and their re-formation, the title of the work, and the manner of its exchange are among the aspects of the craftsperson’s narrative. Craft as care, a superimposed story, is not usually overt, whereas in Neale’s work, it is front-and-centre.

An accumulation of woodworking skills (Figure 187) is essential to Neale’s current practice. She confirms the process available to an experienced artisan that was described by Ingold (“Walking”), Schön and Sennett:78 . . . working directly with the object, my crafting skills and understanding of the materials that I work with are essential . . . knowing the curve that I want to create for the legs of the Icon Drawer, planing the timber without needing to mark it out, feeling the way the timber responds to the plane and reacting accordingly. The relationship I have with the object and the materials is a reactive, inter-active one. The process is dynamic, embodied and synergistic; I realise that I have mastery with the materials and processes that I use (41).

The hours invested not only in the individual objects but in the accumulation of skills and knowledge can never be recouped. No price tag can compensate for what has gone into making the obsolesces desirable again.

Finally, while Neale invests time getting to know and revitalising the furniture, her ‘clients’ also have to invest time. There is not a stockpile of transmogrified obsolesces from which to make a selection. If a new exchange is entered into, an IOU is discussed, with the creditor fantasising about the desired object. Neale then begins gleaning, and it may take years before just the right obsolete comes her way. The debtor and creditor trust that time will provide. Both know that as Fry contends, “craft is a material practice of caring in making that folds into the maker and the made” (“Sacred I” 204).

Figure 187. Wendy Neale, Please Sit; detail Please Sit began as an abandoned, wet chair with a broken leg. Neale crafted new legs and stripped the original upholstery to expose a plywood frame. Leaving plywood and legs uncovered to emphasise contrast, she then used a vintage-appropriate winter coat as upholstery, configured like a garment. The detail shows the crafts(wo)manship with which the transformation was made.

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78 Sennett: “In the higher stages of skill, there is a constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-conscious awareness, the tacit knowledge serving as an anchor, the explicit awareness serving as critique and corrective. Craft quality emerges from this higher stage, in judgements made on tacit habits and suppositions” (50).
De-Gendered Maker

Wendy Neale says she was raised “in that ‘girls can do anything’ time.” She was blessed with an upbringing that ingrained her with “of course I can do this and I might have to work a little harder to prove myself, but I’ll give it a go.” Within the masculine furniture realm she encounters the conditioned prejudice of an older generation—tradesmen who assume she is not in charge—and nonchalant acceptance from the younger males. If need be, she just gets “her staunch on.” She feels she was hired not only because of her skills but because she is “a chick”—Massey is an equal opportunity employer. There is nothing about her career as a female furniture maker that makes her experience unique. What is different is her ethos and its consequent work.

Neale is not in an art world (Figure 188) nor does she aspire to be. She is in a world, however, of friends, family, creativity and abundant sustenance. Some might argue that she is not in the studio furniture league, but as she chronicles in her thesis, there are others in her sustainment league. When we look in the mirror she holds to studio furniture, we see a mode of making that represents a different ethical conscience than that of the other case studies. Nevertheless she is a craftsperson: according to Fry, craft “should not be objectified as just object or skill but recognised as the mode of being, and being with, the being of making and the made” (“Green” 260). Neale’s artisanry, creativity, and critical thinking demonstrate the best studio furniture practice; her political consistency, ethics of care and design futuring make her exemplary of the possibilities of the sustainment of studio furniture-making in a world of overabundance of obsolescence and diminishing natural resources.

The buzz words for sustainability were formerly reduce, re-use, recycle. It has now been shown that only the last is tolerated within the capitalist system. Capitalism’s drivers, production and consumption, negate efforts to reduce and re-use; Chapman also points out that recycling is a capitalist enterprise. Entirely new ways of thinking must be explored, at the same time as accommodating human drivers like creativity and the desire to own creative objects. Neale provides a model for accommodating the human needs of the maker and the cherisher.

Figure 188. An Alternative Art World
As noted, Wendy Neale’s work is not intended for the white-walled galleries in which visual art is usually displayed. Her art process begins on sidewalks and in dumpsters, and while she wants to elevate the stature of her lowly gleanings, that stature is not bestowed by the art world. It is bestowed by the private individuals who own and cherish the work. The image above, simply a photo opportunity for the finished thesis pieces, provides an idea of a more appropriate and realistic backdrop than a pristine, stark, commodity-driven gallery.

79 The majority of studio furniture makers begin with new materials, but there are significant exceptions, like Stephen Whittlesey (Figure 124). Similar practitioners identified by Neale include junktion (Israel), Fredrik Fåg (Sweden) and 5.5 Designers (France).
80 Italics in original.
Wendy Neale, like Greg Bloomfield, builds relationships through objects. Her furniture establishes and/or consolidates direct, long-lasting social connections with a limited audience. Like Bloomfield she is an outsider, whose skills conform to best-practice standards but whose aesthetic and essence are very different from that of Humphrey Ikin or John Shaw. Because of its unorthodoxy, however, Neale’s furniture speaks volumes about the practice of which she is a part. I now conclude with my final case study, a man whose words spoke volumes about studio furniture’s place in New Zealand.

**The Writer: Colin Slade**

Colin Slade (Figure 189) stopped making furniture in the late 1990s. Yet each time I interviewed him he commented that I had stirred feelings about an activity that was still in his blood. Behind his Wellington home he anticipates refurbishing a shed where ‘messing about in wood’ 81 will renew the benefits of the career he pursued for almost thirty years.

The fact that Slade is no longer a maker warrants discussion within the context of the topic. Furniture makers, who are heavily reliant on physical prowess, cannot be assured that their bodies will be accommodating in the long term. Illness and injury, sometimes as a direct result of making, require alternative paths; economic and personal factors also interfere with the best-made plans. Compromise and total abandonment are sometimes reluctant choices.

Significantly, Slade’s subsequent career as a mental health advocate is based on his major contributions to the woodworking community: writing and leadership. His facility with writing, which was published in national magazines and newspapers, brought recognition to craft and studio furniture communities. His willingness to use his language skills and, thereby, be a spokesperson is unsurpassed amongst his furniture peers. For this reason he joins my case studies among the other five practitioners who are still active on a regular basis.

I acknowledge the parallel between Slade and myself. We both trained in furniture-making and employ the knowledge of that training to write authoritatively about its practitioners and their work. My furniture-making is novice compared to Slade’s yet I take pride in standing beside him as a chronicler of the practice in New Zealand. This section begins with Slade’s training and then explores his leadership in words and deeds.

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81 With apologies to Kenneth Grahame and Rat: “there is nothing—absolute nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats” (Gauger 13).
Endorsing Tradition

Colin Slade was born in England in 1949 and, after five years doing woodwork and cabinetmaking at secondary school, undertook a four-year chairmaking apprenticeship when he was 17. High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, is in a valley of the Chiltern Hills surrounded by beech forest. Daniel Defoe, writing about “Great Britain” in the 1720s noted that “a vast quantity of beech wood” in the shire82 was used for chairmaking and turning (“Daniel”). Thousands of Windsor chairs (Figure 190a) were made in High Wycombe and, beginning in 1880, the industry expanded to a broader range of furniture (“Furniture Making”). In the 1960s, apprenticeships were offered in a variety of specialties—woodcarving, upholstery, finishing—and Slade went to Frank Hudson and Son, a small factory of about 15 workers doing reproductions of classic chair designs.

In 1988 Slade recalled his entry to the trade in a lecture he presented during the Contemporary Furniture Show (page 108); I include the entire passage because we are considering him as a writer:

On a grey December afternoon back in 1965, I stood in the office-cum-studio of Frank Hudson [Figure 190b], master carver, and furniture factory boss of High Wycombe, England. [It was an office such as I had never been in before.] The desk in its centre was unusable, covered to some depth as it was by books on furniture, architectural design etc., rolled up drawings squashed as flat as the books, and the whole shambles covered with a generous shower of wood chips. At the side of the room stood a large bench which too was covered with similar strata of material and in its centre was the cause of all the wood chips. It was an architectural carving that Frank had been working on before my father and I had entered. I don’t remember the detail [being afraid to look as one inclined to do in the presence of an unfinished work of art]. I do remember an abundance of flora carved in the mixture of robustness and voluptuousness that was Frank’s own style, and that the wood was lime. [The creamy coloured chips were easily identified.] I was there to become indentured as an apprentice at Frank’s firm and the man himself was giving me the first of countless homilies I was to hear from him over the next five years. “Furniture,” Frank was saying, with the tremendous conviction that he customarily employed in such speeches, “is one of the Fine...
Arts and don’t you forget it!” (Slade “If” 9)

This passage comes from a version of the lecture that appeared in New Zealand Crafts. During the revision of the original manuscript, which I found in the Auckland Museum archives, not only were punctuation added, redundancies eliminated and diplomacy invoked, the passages in square brackets were deleted. They may have been superfluous for general craft readers but I believe they are important to Colin Slade as a furniture maker and reporter.

When Slade wrote his speech, he was looking back twenty years and, perhaps, embellishing his memories for the sake of flow in a public presentation. But I contend that the first deleted sentence about his never having seen a similar office reflects a kind of awe-ful emotion that stayed with him for decades. The impression—that Frank Hudson’s office was unusual—had an impact: Slade committed to, and stayed with, an indenture to Hudson and recalled his novice observation for an audience at the Auckland Museum that comprised a goodly number of woodworkers. Those woodworkers were fully familiar with such offices.

The second deleted passage, about humility in the presence of an artistic work-in-progress, suggests that the teenage Slade had an inkling of art and the decorum afforded fine art. Works designated as fine art are deemed works of genius; one does not look into the eyes of a genius/god or examine his work, especially when it is not yet perfect. The analysis of why Slade did not look may have come later; at the time, he only noted voluptuous flora. In 1988, he used his reluctance to witness the unfinished work to presage what was coming: a discussion of the art and craft divide, particularly its manifestation in studio furniture.

Finally, the recognition of the shavings as lime indicates a pre-existing knowledge of wood species when Slade took up his apprenticeship. And it also signals to the Auckland Museum audience that he is an authority on furniture-making and therefore qualified to make the remarks about art and craft and furniture that follow. He presses his authority further, later in the speech, by referring to his Presidency of the Crafts Council.

The entire excerpt demonstrates Slade’s use of rhetoric: description, adjectives, characters, time line, dialogue. He creates an evocative mental picture about the episode that launched his career and uses it as the device to capture his listeners’ attention for the philosophical treatise that ensues. I highlight Slade’s writing skills concurrently with describing his practice because that is how it occurred in real time. First mention of Slade is in Crafts Council News, December 1981. He probably wrote and submitted the passage above his name as Secretary of the Canterbury Guild of Woodworkers (“Woodcraft”). The very fact of his secretariaship shows the nature of his contribution.

Returning to Slade’s apprenticeship, it is worthy of note that, like John Shaw, he obtained a City and Guilds of London Institute qualification. Not long afterwards, he tried to escape the “indoors and dust” of factory life by working on a farm, but his family guided him back to the furniture trade, this time in a London furniture restoration workshop. The employment offered the opportunity to copy chairs that were in the Victoria and Albert Museum but, again, original designs were not part of the repertoire.

In 1972 Slade returned to agriculture, this time by means of an assisted passage to New Zealand. For four years he was a herd tester and field supervisor for the Auckland Livestock Improvement Association and in 1976 decided he needed a change of scene. He visited the South Island on a working holiday and saw an advertisement for an ‘old English’ furniture maker in a crafts cooperative called

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83 Slade’s father was an architect.
84 Griselda Pollock discusses the myth of genius with respect to Vincent Van Gogh: “The regulated, institutionally trained, professional literature of art history uses its own words to produce a notion of art as ineffable, pristine, discrete—a non-verbal experience rooted in the difference of the artist, who is simultaneously distinct from other men and yet the epitome of universal man. It thus simultaneously separates art from social history and protects its own position as the privileged producer of a ‘literature of art’. If VG [Van Gogh] is produced as the paradigm of the artist, that place is supported by the assimilation of VG to another historical representation, the correspondence of ‘madness’ and ‘art’—the myth of the mad genius” (64).
85 In addition to his secondary studies, Slade’s youth required forest activities apart from cutting firewood: “I remember as a boy helping my father gather beech and birch prunings and thinnings for pea-sticks and runner bean poles” (“Letter” June 1989 14).
Craftland on Victoria Street in Christchurch. When the co-operative foundered he established his own workshop in May 1977.

Slade reverted to making chairs and doing restoration work. The chairs were traditional—ladderbacks with rush webbed seats (Figure 191). He described his aesthetic: “I’ve always stayed within a fairly classical type of mould. The Arts and Crafts period in England, the Cotswolds in England and so on, that interested me a great deal” (Personal 2008). Later in his career (1992) he did research about the Arts and Crafts practitioners and the work of the Edward Barnsley Workshop at the Cheltenham Museum in England. He was a stickler for comfort—“that was always a strong factor in the design sense”—and executed his chairs with local materials, rejecting pine after several breakages and opting for native beech and locally grown English hardwoods such as ash, walnut, and oak (Blair “Colin” 10).

Through his wife, Barbara, who was studying pottery with Frederika Ernsten, a local member of the Crafts Council, he came into contact with potters, weavers and jewellers. The association, as was the

Figure 191. Colin Slade’s Showroom and Workshop, Ferry Road, Christchurch, 1978-1982
The image, taken in December 1980, attests to Slade’s practice at this time. The sign on the window states, “Colin Slade Craftsman Chairmaker Fine Quality Reproduction & Restoration.” Slade’s designs in this period were ones he learned during his apprenticeship, so the sign nominates these as reproduction; he was also able to restore existing furniture. On the street in front of the shop are eight ladderback chairs with woven seats. They are similar to those manufactured by Frank Hudson and Son during the 1960s and were the first chair forms produced by Slade when he set up shop in New Zealand. Although posed for the photograph, the placement of the chairs is reminiscent of a tradesman’s premises on the high street in an earlier era.

Craftland on Victoria Street in Christchurch. When the co-operative foundered he established his own workshop in May 1977.

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Figure 192. Colin Slade, Range of Chairs from his Workshop
Farmhouse Windsor chair, 1984. Ash (left); Smokers Bow Windsor, 1984. Ash (centre); Armchair with tapestry upholstery, c. 1981. New Zealand silver beech (stained) (right)
The maker of the tapestry, Una Martin, was a long-time Slade client. Each time she finished a needlework she commissioned a new chair. Slade’s traditional chair designs suited the upholstery and provided bread-and-butter income.
case for Carin Wilson, proved revelatory: “As somebody brought up in a
traditional set view of furniture, I suddenly realised that furniture-making had a
place in contemporary design and so I started looking at my own work and
exploring much more” (Personal 2008). Wilson invited Slade to the inaugural
meeting of the Canterbury Guild in 1978 and over the next years, in addition
to being secretary, Slade was instrumental in organising, and participated in,
the Guild’s Annual Exhibitions held at the Canterbury Society of Arts Gallery.
His work was accorded several merit awards in those displays.

Images of Slade’s work from this period show a mix of reproductions of
English styles (Figure 192). A reviewer of the Canterbury Crafts Council
Exhibition in August/September 1983 described his submission as follows:
“Colin Slade’s rocking chair was a well-formed, unaffected piece. The chair
was made from a huge ash using the unusual amount of dark wood at the heart
of the tree for the main body of the chair, and the lighter sap wood for the
rungs and crossbars” (Blair “Canterbury”). He was also willing to fulfil others’
designs: a chair for the Chairman of the Canterbury Hospital Board in 1983
was designed by David Thornley (Figure 193).

By 1983 there was sufficient momentum amongst furniture makers for
Slade and his colleagues to stage the first Alternative Furniture Show
exhibition (page 100). He was a member of the CCNZ locally and initiated the
compilation of the Canterbury Craft Directory; this was a significant ‘first’ for a local association in that it
led to the employment of a Vocational Office Training Programme trainee as a craft promotion and
research officer. Then in 1984, when Ernststen stood down as the CCNZ Canterbury representative, Slade
made his debut on the National Executive.

Slade’s second Christchurch showroom/workshop was in Cashel Street (Figure 194), but he had
ambitions to consolidate home and studio. With his wife he purchased a property on Banks Peninsula
(Figure 195) and made application to the Arts Council for a grant to assist in construction of a workplace
(Slade Application). Slade’s application was personal as well as community-minded. He would get his
first purpose-built workshop but also anticipated providing bench space for at least two apprentices. As a
former apprentice himself Slade championed the merits of learning by doing. His writing frequently
proposed the master/pupil model and he felt compelled to sustain the tradition: “I was aware of the
whole continuity of the craft of which we are a part, therefore, having benefitted from being taught, being

initiated . . . I was obliged to do my bit and pass it on” (Slade quoted in “Working” 4). He also knew the
merits of a supportive working environment and anticipated that the Akaroa premises would become a
craft cooperative where makers could share resources and creative energy. The site was on the main
highway, on a route frequented by tourists, and a showroom was integral to Slade’s scheme.

I will return shortly to further discussion of the studio. Suffice to say, the construction was
completed to a sufficient degree that Slade was able to operate his business from Barry’s Bay (Figure 196).
By this stage he was supporting a wife and two daughters, one of whom was born during the 1984 CCNZ
Conference at Lincoln College in Canterbury. Touch Wood noted that Slade gave demonstrations of
turning chair legs on a treadle lathe at that conference (“Crafts Council Conference”). A marketing
brochure titled “Colin Slade Chairmaker” (Figure 197) from the late 1980s shows sketches of 12 styles of
chairs, one bench and five tables that are described as being made “on a regular basis” and therefore

Figure 196. Colin Slade Outside his Barry’s Bay Workshop (bottom right)
This photo was intended as a spoof on the Victorian chairmaker. Despite Slade’s grin and the
architecturally-pleasing rural premises, the spiky gnarled vine that surrounds Slade plus the
Gothic colour tone contribute a sinister atmosphere. Slade looks the part of the village
chairmaker. Inside the shop (left), Slade is captured adzing the seat of a Windsor chair. On the
workbench (right), an assembled chair sits amidst the tools of its making; in the foreground a
stockpile of individually-turned legs await installation. The photo displays the less romantic
aspects of being a craftsman: the necessity of repeated production of certain elements. The
hours of standing at a lathe to turn legs is tedious.
Colin Slade
CHAIRMAKER
BARRYS BAY
BANKS PENINSULA
NEW ZEALAND

Figure 197. Colin Slade, Chairmaker, Brochure
A portion of the text of the two page document warrants inclusion: “THE CONSTRUCTION: All chairs are constructed individually by traditional methods proved over centuries, to ensure that properly cared for, they will last for generations. Individual construction also means that attention can be paid to clients’ specific requirements regarding dimensions for optimum comfort. Carving, turning and shaping is done exclusively by hand, making each chair unique - a product of the maker, not the machine. THE FINISH: Natural oils and waxes are applied by hand to enhance the beauty of the wood as well as to provide a practical surface for everyday use. Unlike synthetically finished furniture these chairs will grow more beautiful with the passage of time. THE VALUE: Such attention to detail does not of course come cheaply. However the benefits of sound individual construction and good design which will not date, together mean that replacement need never be considered. These factors should always be borne in mind if prices are to be compared.” Slade’s document is educational: it informs a purchaser of the benefits of his furniture in comparison to the mass-produced.
more economical than “one-off” designs. A codicil added: “Commissions for the design and/or construction of contemporary special purpose chairs are very welcome.” This brochure, a mini catalogue, coupled with Slade’s ongoing endeavours to maintain a visible business, demonstrate his commitment to professionalising his practice and, by example, studio furniture.

Keeping to his desire to mentor trainees, he accepted David Haig’s request for a two-month residency in 1986. Haig was able to get an Arts Council grant of $2,500 (“Annual Scheme”) to spend one month on Slade’s production work and one month on his own. “David said that it would be hard to outline the high value of his time with Colin because most of the benefits came from ‘small tips’ and guidance rather than completely new processes” (“Working” 4).

Slade rode the wave of studio furniture through the 1980s and early 1990s: the Alternative...
Furniture Shows (Figure 198), the Furniture Group, the Contemporary Furniture Show, Crafts Council exhibitions. Slade was more involved with making furniture (Figure 199) than with the national craft organisation once his Presidency of the CCNZ ended, but when the Crafts Council went into receivership he stepped forward again. He told me: “Lots of us were appalled at the collapse and mounted a campaign to save the Crafts Council and we got some money from QEII [Arts Council] . . . to establish some kind of organisation to continue the work and at least to continue the information network; to keep the membership supported and connected” (Personal 2008). Slade became President of the Interim Steering Committee, identified as Craft Aotearoa (page 72), but its existence was short-lived. Although he was disappointed by the Crafts Council’s demise, he was able to return to full-time making.

In the year prior to the CCNZ’s demise, Slade’s marriage collapsed. He continued making furniture (Figure 200) in Barry’s Bay but the property was sold when his youngest daughter left primary school in 1994. He moved back to Christchurch where he worked from various rented premises—“I remember one concrete slab place I had for a year, it was incredibly cold.” The proliferation of imported furniture was making it increasingly difficult to sell the handmade variety; at the same time, Slade was finding it...
difficult to stand at his machinery and workbench. The buildup of negative factors led to Slade’s hospitalisation for mental and physical breakdown (1997-98). The medical intervention permitted diagnosis and treatment of a thyroid problem as well as psychological therapy. When he regained his strength he sought an activity with less stress and got a job as an orderly in Princess Margaret Hospital. He found it “really enjoyable and rewarding.” Patients expressed gratitude for simple gestures like being helped into a wheel chair, and Slade became aware of the contrast between this appreciation and recognition and what he contended with by making furniture:

It’s a mixed pleasure. People would always say, “oh you must find it so satisfying” and, well yes, sometimes. But often it was a real struggle and you’d be dealing with the public all the time and you’d get some people that would really appreciate what you did—those who really knew what good work was and weren’t worried about paying for it. And others would come into the workshop and look at a chair with a nine hundred dollar price tag and say, “where’s the gold plate?” And they’d driven up in a BMW or something (Personal 2008).

Slade valued the contentment that caring afforded him and when a mental health advocacy job arose, he met the qualifications, especially with his good communication skills. He enjoyed the role—talking to people using services, ascertaining their issues, and reporting—and the opportunity to try to improve the system. After a couple of years he moved on to management of the Psychiatric Consumers Trust, an independent peer-advocacy service funded by a District Health Board. Four years later he shifted to Wellington where, after a short period of employment, he established a consultancy: “Mental health patients, consumers, Tangata whaiora [service users], have been dreadfully discriminated against over the years. There’s this great fear of mental illness and so people in the past have been locked away and now there’s much more community treatment but there’s still a lot of discrimination. So my work’s about improving the system and consumer advocacy.”

Slade had enjoyed the communication and human relatedness of his leadership days in the CCNZ: “It was stimulating. I loved the involvement, moving around the country now and then. At exhibitions and so on, meeting people, doing all sorts of interesting stuff, very stimulating” (2008). These benefits are being replicated in his present career. And in 2009 he formally renewed his association with the arts by joining the Council of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, a venerable Wellington institution since 1882. Frank Hudson would have been pleased to see his former apprentice so closely aligned with fine art.87

Readership and Leadership

Slade describes his writing as freelance journalism. It began in the same way as participation in the community: he put himself and his opinions forward. He wrote letters to the editor, and New Zealand Crafts and Touch Wood published a total of ten; his evident facility with words and increasing reputation lead to articles and reviews. In some instances a freelancer is asked to cover a topic; in others the freelancer proposes a topic for an editor’s consideration. Frequently the monetary rewards of freelance journalism are minimal, particularly when the publication is arts-based or not-for-profit. The writing, however, has other rewards—recognition, building credentials, community involvement and contribution, and the opportunity to meet stimulating subjects. Slade gave an example: “I remember writing an article in one of those crafts magazines, interviewing a traditional lace maker and finding out a lot about the history of it, so [it was] fascinating to do the interview and the article was good, I think” (2008).

87 Slade resigned his affiliation with NZAFA in 2010.
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Figure 202  Colin Slade’s Woodworking Community Involvement 1978-1998
Slade’s participation in the woodworking community was most intense between 1983 and 1992. It must be remembered that this chart does not include the hours necessary to make the work for commissions and exhibitions. Very little of the activity mentioned here was revenue earning.
Some of Slade’s writing was the result of his CCNZ Presidency. He wrote nine ‘editorials’ or messages in *New Zealand Crafts*, the CCNZ Newsletter and *Touch Wood* over the by-line “Colin Slade, President.” He penned eight features in *New Zealand Crafts* and six in *Touch Wood/The New Zealand Woodworker*. He wrote eight columns titled “Letter from Barrys Bay” (Figure 201) in *The New Zealand Woodworker* covering the topics of judging furniture (December 1988), reforestation (March 1989), harvesting timber (June 1989), furniture exhibitions (Summer 1989), a national wood group (#21), manufactured boards (#22), scrapers (Spring 1990) and the myth of the satisfied woodcraftsman (Summer 1991). There was a letter and an article in the *Listener* and 21 articles in the *The Press* (Christchurch). The latter covered diverse cultural topics like craftspeople, a classical concert, exhibition reviews, marketing craft and the preservation of the 1911 Akaroa hydro plant.

Slade had an engaging style, mixing relevant anecdotes from his own experience with philosophy and practical wisdom. His articles were definitely read. There were several instances where he answered comments from readers’ letters: *The New Zealand Woodworker* column on scrapers was in response to a complaint about too much philosophy in previous issues and permitted Slade to discuss, with drawings, a scraper design from his High Wycombe days. All told this was a formidable writing portfolio, given that the writer was also making furniture and, from 1984 to 1986, was involved in the Crafts Council at the national level.

Noeline Brokenshire expressed concern about Slade’s lifestyle in 1987, noting that as President he was dedicated to the betterment of all craft media in New Zealand. Nevertheless, she added: “[This] must put extra strains on his family and must affect the output of his own work as he is required to travel to Wellington and other parts of New Zealand, quite often, on Crafts Council business” (“Working” 1). Slade’s biography attests to the consequences of the pace he set himself: the table (Figure 202) documents his curriculum vitae during his furniture years.

An employment counsellor might chastise Slade’s over-commitment as self-inflicted but, in response to such criticism, I return to Slade’s 1984 Arts Council application for financial assistance to construct a studio. This episode highlights the reality for those who took leadership roles within the New Zealand crafts community. Slade was forthright in stating ‘the facts’ in his grant application:

> In recent years I have become increasingly interested and active in community work within the craft(s), perhaps to the neglect of my own work. Major contributions (but far from being the only ones) have been the promotion of the Alternative Furniture Shows. My annual Balance Sheets and daily time sheets bear testimony to the thousands of dollars I have “given” in terms of full time organisation of these and other events, largely for the benefit of other craftworkers. I did not personally need the Alternative Furniture Show. Prior to the first show, my order list was already six months long. Nevertheless I saw an urgent need and recognised the part that I could play in filling that need (Slade Application).

Slade hoped that his community-mindedness would stand him in good stead when the Arts Council reviewed his application. He provided a detailed budget covering materials and utilities installation that amounted to $16,000; he stated that he had secured a loan of $9,000. His request for $7,000 from the Arts Council was reduced to $4,000, significantly limiting the hire of building labour. He had a builder erect the main structure. A year later, in his bid for the CCNZ Presidency, he described the building project as partially complete thanks to the help of friends who did all the finishing work.

Slade was not bemoaning his sacrifices. He valued craft and held the conviction that by helping the community he supported himself. The benefits of the *Alternative Furniture Show* were significant, yet these and hundreds of other events would not have happen were it not for volunteers like Colin

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88 *New Zealand Crafts* (Autumn and Spring 1986; Autumn 1987); CCNZ Newsletter (December 1985, March 1986, #10, #15, #16); *Touch Wood* (March 1987).

89 In November 2011, during a two-week professional development leave at the Centre for Fine Woodworking, Simon King made yet another of Slade’s scrapers and commended Slade’s knowledge from which New Zealand woodworkers benefitted (Personal observation).

90 This article is not specifically attributed to Brokenshire but as editor she authored all material except that identified as written by others.
Slade. Even the CCNZ Presidency was akin to volunteering: the stipend was just under $6,000 per year.\textsuperscript{91} The accumulated evidence (Figure 59) shows that the sector was poorly funded with trickle-down effects for practitioners. In 1984, 52 craftspeople applied for Arts Council grants; 16 were successful acquiring a total of $60,000 (Pattrick “1984”).\textsuperscript{92} Slade was denied $3,000 (he was not unique) at a time when $10,000 was spent to send the Chairmen of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council and the Council of Māori and South Pacific Arts to the opening of the Te Maori Exhibition\textsuperscript{93} at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (QEII Arts Council “Report 1985”). In summary the community survived and advanced due to the individuals who sacrificed income, financial affluence, personal development and family life.

This statement in no way implies that there were not dedicated supporters amongst salaried people as well. Slade credits Justine Olsen, former Curator of Applied Arts at the Auckland Museum, as being dedicated to craft: in addition to instigating the Contemporary Furniture Show she took the initiative to establish the Index of New Zealand Craftspeople, Designers and Manufacturers, the upkeep of which was assigned to volunteers.\textsuperscript{94} James Mack, former Director of the Dowse, was also a strong proponent of craft and made that museum a mecca for crafts practitioners and supporters during his tenure (1981-1988). Yet necessary reliance on volunteerism accounts for the lack of visibility of crafts today. Margery Blackman an accomplished weaver, textiles historian, and, in her day, committed Crafts Council contributor at both the local (Dunedin) and national level, talked about the circumstances locally:

> We established the Dunedin chapter of the Crafts Council. There was sufficient of us who were very enthusiastic and we set up a craft gallery, which was all manned voluntarily. . . . But after two or three years the number of people who could man it sufficiently was not viable and we developed a relationship with the Otago Museum, and as part of the Museum shop we had a craft gallery. It was staffed by the Museum but we were responsible for selecting, displaying and supplying the goods. And for a few years it worked quite well. But partly, I think, through changes in Museum policy and partly, again, by some of us feeling that we’d made a major contribution and it was time for younger people to become more involved [pause] (Blackman).

Blackman didn’t finish her sentence though her thought was clear. When the same people contribute repeatedly, they get tired, and hope that the next generation will take their place. Succeeding cohorts have different priorities and values—it is rare these days for one spouse to be financially supported by the other, as Blackman was. Now, volunteering is neither financially viable nor expected, and the generation that readily contributed unpaid employment is in its 60s, 70s and 80s. The likelihood of a handful of individuals replicating what was done voluntarily for craft in New Zealand in the past is, sadly, remote.

To some degree, Colin Slade’s over-commitment was forced upon him. Without the financial support to hire labour to finish his workshop, he and friends had to add that to their existing workload. Constrained financial assistance to the crafts sector also meant he undertook administrative and organisational roles that would not have happened without him. But Slade willingly did what was necessary for the vitality of furniture and craft. His initiative brought needed recognition to studio furniture in the South Island and New Zealand.

\textsuperscript{91} The CCNZ Annual Report for 1986/87 states the President’s Honorarium for 1985/86 was $5,623 and for 1986/87 $5,823. In the Crafts Council Newsletter of September 1987 it was reduced to $3,000 (“What’s Happening” Sept. 1987).

\textsuperscript{92} The award categories were Full-time Study, Travel, Special Projects, Workshop Development and Equipment. Pattrick noted that there were almost twice as many applicants as in the previous year, asking for more than twice as much money ($266,500).

\textsuperscript{93} For a thorough discussion of the planning and significance of Te Maori see Mead. My reference to it here is solely to compare financial outlay for sinecures relative to funding for those contributing substantially to New Zealand culture.

\textsuperscript{94} When I visited the Auckland Museum (February 2010) I was told that keeping the Index up-to-date depends on the perseverance of a single volunteer: she contributes to it when she can.
Writing the Future

I began this section with the speech given by Colin Slade at the Auckland Museum in 1988 and I return to it as a seminal piece of writing for New Zealand studio furniture. By this time, Slade had garnered considerable respect within the furniture community for the high calibre of his making skills. His writing skills and critical thinking further warranted his being a spokesperson for his peers. The speech and its publication took place twenty years ago, yet they contain themes that resonate with this thesis. When I read “If It’s Craft It’s Art” in 2009 I made margin notes highlighting pertinent details. Reading it again, from a more knowledgeable perspective, I was surprised by how closely my hypotheses mirror Slade’s. He was articulating matters that are both timeless and have yet to be addressed. And it is fitting to end this case study by considering the themes he articulated over 20 years ago.

Slade begins with a question and the reason why he asks it: “Why is furniture no longer considered a precious family possession? It’s an important question because the answers to it tell us a lot about our society and how it has developed over the centuries” (9). Although Slade’s question is addressed to the Western world, for the sake of this discussion I will limit “our society” to New Zealand. Therefore the question becomes, if New Zealanders are loath to cherish the domestic possessions of their forebears, what does this say about their culture?

Figure 203. Colin Slade, Dining Set, 1988. English oak, seagrass

This straightforward design would readily serve as either a formal dining set or for kitchen meals. The design is not dated and the traditional construction will withstand a lifetime’s wear-and-tear. The most vulnerable aspects are the surface finish and the seagrass seats, both of which could be updated by a trained craftsman. With reasonable care, this set is heirloom quality and could be passed to the next generation. Yet most purchasers look solely at the price tag and declare these goods uneconomical and elitist. This attitude will be addressed in my Conclusion, Chapter 5.

Slade originated in Great Britain, a nation steeped in history and the objects embedded in that history. His apprenticeship was devoted to replicating those objects and the techniques by which they were made. The traditional table and chair joints he was taught are still state-of-the-art, a technology that has never been surpassed (Figure 203). The making of those joints takes time, material and skill; when these factors are eliminated, a cheaper piece of furniture can certainly be manufactured, but eventually the mechanical joints—staples, nails, or screws—fail. Affordable furniture is not of heirloom standard: it will not withstand the rigours of generations of use. A product that is unworthy is not worth treasuring.

The rich details of New Zealand’s colonial furniture only became known in 2006 with the publication of William Cottrell’s book. Ignorance of the existence of this design and manufacturing heritage meant that citizens looked elsewhere for furniture history. Instead of patronising and, thereby,

95 I visited a furniture factory in Denmark, PP Møbler, that manufactures Hans Wegner designs under license. Joints are cut precisely and in less time by CNC (computer numerical control) routing machines, but the assembly is hand-done by skilled craftsmen.
fostering the industry locally, Europe or the United States were where heirlooms came from. For those whose financial wherewithal precluded antiques or fashionable styling from Italy or Scandinavia, the choice was less expensive furniture from Asia. The elimination of import tariffs in the 1980s contributed to the market's saturation with poor quality merchandise. Lack of esteem for the local product and the failure of New Zealand industry to marry quality construction with design meant that its output was undesirable to discriminating buyers. Social, economic, educational and political factors account for this society's disinterest in well-made, well-designed locally-produced furniture. And the situation, today, has not altered.

The next topic in Slade's speech is the art and craft debate, an issue that has been largely skirted in this thesis, even though it prevails in New Zealand. Slade noted that establishment art critics refrain from reviewing craft and regard it pejoratively. At the time he penned his address, New Zealand Crafts, one of the only outlets for craft discussion, was still being published. Since its demise in 1993 there has been no national voice for crafts and reliance on the art press for recognition of craftspeople and their work is as futile now as it was then. Since taking residence in this country in 2006 I have published eleven articles about New Zealand craftspeople. All have been in overseas magazines despite proposals to relevant national editors.

Slade alluded to the ‘art world’ that I described in the section about Greg Bloomfield: “...this hierarchy, like most, has a lot to do with power and money, it’s important for the maintenance of the status quo that everybody involved, artist, patron, dealer and critic alike, is kept assured of the superiority (and therefore greater investment value) of painting and sculpture over other art disciplines” (9). He then suggested that it is the job of crafts councils in the Western world to present alternative views from that of the hierarchy. With no craft council now extant in New Zealand there is no body to counter the “status quo.” Slade even proposed that, “discrimination against craft and particularly furniture has obviously had a greater effect in New Zealand because of its isolation” (11). One of the consequences of that isolation, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, is limitation: interference with the status quo is minimal. Overseas media (e.g. design magazines), and their interpretation by local trendsetters, represent the status quo.

Within the art/craft dichotomy, functional items are diminished in stature while artistic items are elevated, with the result that some craftspeople have crossed into the more favoured camp. Slade noted that sculptural ceramics might find a place on a New Zealander's shelf whereas sculptural furniture, a more costly outlay, would not be given floor space. As was the case in 1988, there are no ‘art’ schools in New Zealand that teach furniture; therefore, furniture, whether traditional or conceptual, does not have status. At the Rhode Island School of Design, the furniture department stands alongside painting, sculpture, printmaking, architecture, textiles, and industrial design. Students from all disciplines mix in compulsory general studies courses where hierarchies are broken down. Had Carin Wilson's proposal of an elite craft school been adopted, and exploration of functional and conceptual craft been advanced, faculty, graduates, activities, overseas visitors and, most importantly, work would have been accorded respect and stature.

Slade moved on to discuss furniture as a consumer product, driven by profit. Consumerism, he stated, is a philosophy that ostensibly provides low-cost, quality goods to a mass market. In order that products produce profit, the patina of quality is created by language: ‘traditional,’ ‘timeless,’ ‘craftsmanship,’ ‘design,’ ‘antiques of the future’ and ‘the warmth of natural wood.’ Slade was scathing about the prostitution of Industrial Design as design solely in the service of industry: “they [industrial designers] use their design language to clothe an inferior product with a veneer which implies substance and which shouts desirability” (12). As already pointed out, future antiques are well-made with authentic durable materials. The general public has yet to fully understand what constitutes authenticity, quality and value for money.

Slade's address concluded by drawing attention to sustainability. Furniture manufacturers sustain

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96 A hyperbole for manufactured boards that are reconstituted ‘real’ wood chips.
planned obsolescence: fashion and inferior construction ensure repurchase. The alternative was eloquently articulated:

When the clients in Blenheim to whom I recently delivered a table and chairs [seen in Figure 203] were saying nice things about it, I could tell by experience that they weren’t just being polite or expressing ordinary pleasure over a new purchase. I believe they were responding to a spiritual and aesthetic impulse which had to do with the fact that the material came from a tree growing on this land, which was planted by a previous generation and that it grew alongside later generations, and that it tells its own life story. I believe that there are some absolute truths about our spiritual dependence on and relationship to this planet and the things growing on it, and that the combination in a sensitive work of craft, of natural material skilfully worked by human hand, provides the medium for these truths to make their intangible existence felt (12).

The land, its resources, forebears, humanity, conservation, spirit—Slade asserts that studio furniture symbolises these elemental factors. Within the context of this thesis he was articulating care and holism. The absence of caring and holism “tell[s] us a lot about our society” (see page 219). Absence of these values is manifest in: failure to honour local history and protect national industry; affirmation through foreign cultures rather than the national one; and wholesale adoption of consumerism and profit-driven motivators. Colin Slade’s address in 1988 bore witness to New Zealand society. In the subsequent years only a few steps have been taken toward change: a private citizen, in his own time and at his own expense, documented the early history of New Zealand furniture; Māori interests have brought attention to respect for natural resources. But furniture manufacturing has all but disappeared, hand-made products are considered elite unless they come from the third world, and consumerism continues to stratify land-fill sites.

In anticipation of his Presidency of the Crafts Council, Slade had a platform: increased exposure for craft, connecting craft and industry, marketing craft, inclusivity of Māori and Pākehā craft practitioners, greater exchange with local and international craft organisations. He articulated his beliefs through his writing, his making and his commitment to New Zealand culture. For the sake of “our society,” his vision still warrants fulfilment.

**Conclusion**

At the Forum that arose as a consequence of *Framed: A Studio Furniture Survey 1997*, it appeared that New Zealand’s furniture makers were divergent. The group of makers, that had sufficient common ground to inaugurate the Furniture Group eight years previously, could not find consensus or leadership to collectively take their medium into the future. Nevertheless, studio furniture did not disappear from this country. As has been shown by means of the case studies, some of the practitioners still felt passionate enough about making furniture that they carried on, with goodly measures of success. Over time, their portfolios diversified—Carin Wilson into the Māori design community and Humphrey Ikin into architecture—as a product both of the national context and the makers’ stages in life. Yet the desire, or even compulsion, to make furniture remained.

It could not be said that those practicing studio furniture in New Zealand were ever a tightly-knit community. Geography delimited a community in that sense. Nevertheless, a verifiable community of practice existed for between 15 and 20 years; that community still exists, even now occasionally getting

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97 Trade Aid, a New Zealand company, promotes and markets the crafts of third world makers. Its efforts are laudable, particularly as they bring income to destitute families. However, because those workers’ wages are minimal, their goods undercut the work of New Zealand craftspeople. New Zealanders benevolently support African and Asian makers but have no similar conscience about supporting local handcrafts.

98 The New Zealand government announced the country would undergo a switch to digital television by 2013. “Other viewers don’t need to buy a new television to make the switch, but may need to buy a set-top box and possibly a new aerial or satellite dish depending on their current equipment or location” (“Digital”).
together. During the heyday of the practice, in the 1980s, the makers were in their 30s and 40s, with extra energy to devote to organising meetings and exhibitions as well as earning a living from the workshop. Today, national collectivity is not a priority. John Shaw and David Haig, for instance, maintain only regional connections because they are manageable alongside other commitments.

The case studies are a lens on the practice of studio furniture in New Zealand. Carin Wilson's career demonstrated the interlacing of craft and furniture in New Zealand, and the indispensability of personal contributions to the health of the craft community as a whole. Wilson's instigation of a series of exhibitions that brought craft and design together were important in introducing the option of conceptually-based furniture to his peers and the public. By contrast Humphrey Ikin, in his single-minded focus on superbly-crafted vernacular furniture, set an example as the studio furniture artist. Although he is adamant that his benches, cupboards, chairs and tables be used, he was supported by a government agency on two occasions to produce solo exhibitions of furniture as art. Ikin aligned himself with his community and its welfare, but the national and international accolades conferred upon him were because he placed studio furniture on a literal pedestal.

Greg Bloomfield, a recognised furniture artist in the United States, is indicative of the consequences for those whose professional ethos was established elsewhere. The research showed that aesthetics, especially, are not easily transferable. In addition, it is evident that networking with peers and engagement with the public play significant roles in establishing visibility in a country with a dearth of galleries that show furniture. While Bloomfield successfully executes conceptual furniture, its New Zealand audience is limited due to visual illiteracy with respect to the genre. Wendy Neale has avoided that handicap by not being reliant on the traditional art world to accept her narrative-imbued furniture. Her work with obsoletes is made for and stays within a personal social network. Because of this, Neale provides a model by which practitioners can derive satisfaction from making without customer constraints; she also provides a model of practice that puts care at the top of its agenda.

Both John Shaw and Colin Slade embody transference of skills and tradition. Shaw's making and teaching are a legacy from European and North American sources. His long-standing commitment to ensuring that woodwork practice is passed forward is rare in New Zealand, and one need only peruse the Gallery page of the Centre for Fine Woodworking website to see evidence of the legacy. Shaw deserves commendation in the New Zealand Royal Honours System for contributions to the community. Slade, too, was a purveyor of tradition. He was respected for his knowledge and deftness in chairmaking; he earned respect for his instigation of and perseverance with the Alternative Furniture Show, the longest-lasting—11 years—annual studio furniture exhibition this country has known. His case study analysed his writing, a skill that, in the days before widespread use of the internet, served the knowledge-sharing and networking needs amongst his peers. Slade was committed to craft nationally, ultimately to his own detriment, but his giving and caring were integral facets of New Zealand's craft history.

The men and woman who comprise the core of this thesis represent the importance of advocacy, responsiveness to the environment, the international context, education, gender and sustainability, and communication to studio furniture's existence in New Zealand to date. Seen in total, the case studies provide a sense of the New Zealand studio furniture community—its training, skills, dedication, aesthetics, personalities and visual record. It is a rich and diverse resource, one that warrants cherishing and preservation. In my final chapter I summarise the findings of the research as a whole and suggest ways in which the perseverance of studio furniture, both nationally and globally, might be assured.

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99 There may be woodworking teachers at the secondary school level who have had similar involvement.