

Remarks on *Craftsman of the Cumberlands: Tradition and Creativity*

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The following essay addresses the several questions relating the Chester Cornett and other craftsmen operating in southeastern Kentucky during the 1960s, the subject of Michael Owen Jones's *Craftsman of the Cumberlands: Tradition and Creativity*. The first pertains to how Chester Cornett generated the designs of his chairs, referencing his innovative design process and his grounding in historical designs and processes. The second brings into question Chester Cornett's financial, aesthetic and emotional motivations for chairmaking and compares and contrasts his motivations with those of fellow chairmaker, Verge. The third speaks to what Chester's work in chair-making reveals about humanity from an aesthetic viewpoint, expanding the notion of folk art beyond something that is "old-fashioned" and towards something we can understand as innovative, creative and artistic. It also opens the relation between "art" and "usefulness." The last deliberates on which of Chester's works are best-suited to exhibition in an art museum, based on aesthetic, historical, and psychological reasoning.

Generating Designs

Chester Cornett generated the designs of his chairs through a process that started with him finding inspiration, often through dreams, then taking the time to think through the physical details of the design and using a combination of innovative techniques and historical processes to realize his designs. Michael Owen Jones describes Cornett's general process as "envisioning in a flash of inspiration a form or parts of a larger form, puzzling about how to actualize the form, and imagining (and even mentally testing) ways to achieve objectives" (Jones 78). Cornett's process is investigated more specifically when Jones describes how Cornett conceived the ideas for the New Design and the Bookcase Masterpiece.

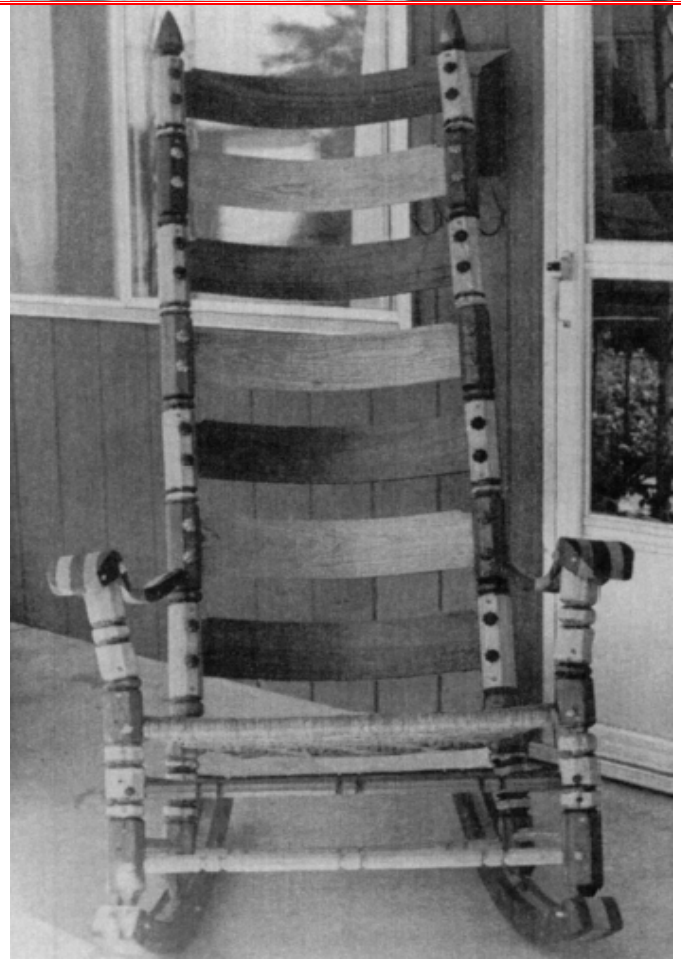


Figure 1 The New Design

In the case of the New Design, "a rocking chair consisting of alternating pieces of dark and light wood," Chester followed the general process detailed above (Jones 67). The process began with the inspiration for the chair coming to him in a dream; Jones mentions that, "Chester told me several of his chairs had appeared to him at night just before he went to sleep and that later he thought about the forms and designs until they were well formulated in his mind" (Jones 66). In addition to drawing inspiration from his dreams, Chester drew inspiration from prior experiences. For instance, he drew inspiration from earlier ideas of contrasting dark and light wood; he previously had plans to make a bedstead using contrasting wood and at one time he made a dining table featuring alternating sassafras and walnut for his wife (Jones 71). In addition, he recalled a chair featuring contrasting colors of wood made for President Kennedy by other chairmakers called Hascal, Verge and Aaron (Jones 78). The chair made for President Kennedy had a checkerboard seat that fascinated Chester and even though he ended up not being able to

incorporate that aspect into the New Design due to lack of materials, that detail factored into his inspiration and design process (Jones 73). This design is rooted in a traditional six-slat rocker design—Chester innovates it by adding another slat and adding the contrasting wood component (Jones 70). As far as assembling processes, Jones claims that, “Some techniques and construction of [the New Design] were traditional in the sense that other craftsmen used them” (Jones 78). These traditional techniques would include using glue and pegging for assembly as well as the shared idea of using contrasting woods. The process of the New Design provides an example of Chester’s process for generating his work.

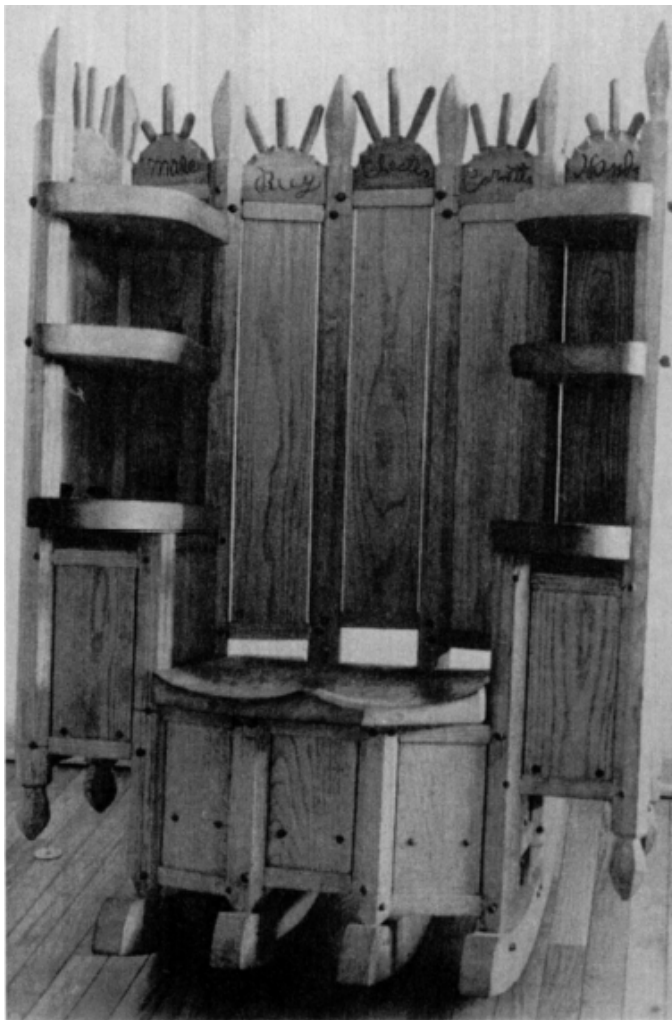


Figure 2 Chester’s Bookcase Masterpiece (Jones 50)

The design of the Bookcase Masterpiece also follows the same general process as the New Design. Jones mentions that the inspiration for the design also likely came to Chester in a dream (Jones

75). In addition to drawing inspiration from the dream, Chester, “Envisioned [Jones] in the chair, remarking that it was for a person like [him] to sit in, surrounded by books...and smoking a pipe” (Jones 75). Chester focus on traits like “solidarity” and the chair being “heavy and enduring”—he developed these traits throughout the process by making the chair throne-like (Jones 75). Like the New Design, he pulled inspiration from earlier designs including “the Dolph chair,” another rocking chair he had made (Jones 75). As far as techniques, he followed traditional techniques he had learned through his career, the Bookcase Masterpiece was an ordinary chair with “twice as many posts and rockers as an ordinary chair” (Jones 77). Overall, “Although nearly every element of the chair had precedent in Chester’s forty-year career as a craftsman, each feature had been elaborated or even carried to an extreme” and in this way Chester innovated (Jones 77). Chester’s process for generating chair designs can be summarized in the follow sequence of events: drawing inspiration from dreams and past experiences, carrying out his designs using traditional techniques (innovating where necessary), ultimately carrying these traditional techniques to extremes as in the Bookcase Masterpiece or adding other elements, such as contrasting wood in the New Design to innovate and create something new and unique.

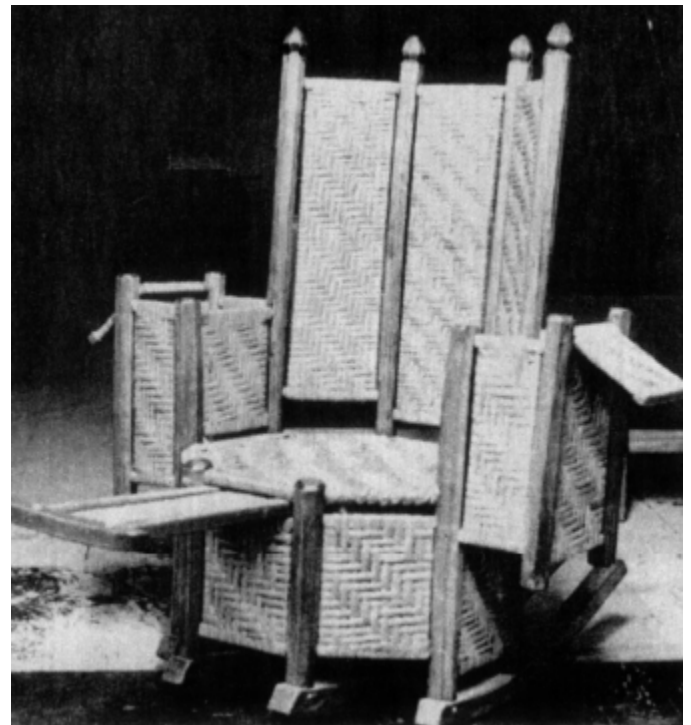


Figure 3 The Dolph Chair (Jones 63)

Motivations

Chester Cornett shares some motivations with other chairmakers, specifically Verge, with whom he shares financial motivations since both seek to make money off of their work. However, when contrasted with the motivations of Verge, Chester puts more value on certain aspects of chair creation, including uniqueness and originality, than Verge. As far as financial motivations, both Chester and Verge aim to make money. However, Verge claims that he “‘makes [chairs] for the money’ and not for the ‘sake of makin’ a good chair’” (Jones 196). Even though Chester too is interested in making money, getting into the habit of making more unique chairs to attract “wealthier clientele whenever possible,” Chester is also interested in constructing chairs where he can exercise his creativity and make something original (Jones 43). In contrast, Verge would rather repair chairs than build them because of larger profits and “Verge was especially keen on achieving rapid production of huge quantities of chairs” (Jones 201). Verge was more interested in making simple chairs that he could crank out, “[he] claimed not to have altered [his chair] dimensions in half a century...The chairs [Jones] did find, however...suggested that Verge increasingly simplified his designs” (Jones 200). Chester’s designs, on the other hand, seemed to get increasingly complicated, with the examples of his elaborate Bookcase Masterpiece and New Design showing just how intricate his designs could become. Aesthetically, both Verge and Chester sought to create a “solid and heavy” chair (Jones 199). However, Verge was critical of Chester’s work, calling his chairs ugly (Jones 200). Verge’s designs were more traditional; he looked in “mail-order catalogs” for designs” (Jones 201) and had “fundamentalist values” (Jones 202). Chester had a “willingness to ‘fool’ with chairmaking, that is, to take it seriously” allowing him to explore different ideas and pursue innovative designs Verge had no interest in creating (Jones 222). Aesthetically, Jones suggests that Chester “wanted to make a chair befitting his self-image as a master craftsman” and for that reason sought out more complicated designs (Jones 59). Jones also indicates that chairmaking was more than a job for Chester—“Chairmaking was the only occupation at which Chester was skilled and the only work he enjoyed” (Jones 93). Even though there is some overlap in Chester’s motivations and Verge’s motivations as far as

aesthetics and financial motivations, Chester placed large value on originality and pushing the chair making into new territory

Chairmaking: Usefulness Versus Art

Craftman of the Cumberlandds reveals a difficulty in reconciling the idea of “art” and the idea of something that is “useful,” at least in Western thinking—*The Potter’s Art* challenges the dichotomy between art and craft, giving the example of Bangladeshi people’s word *shilpa*, that encompasses both art and craft simultaneously (Glassie 30). *Craftman of the Cumberlandds* demonstrates that even though many of people have difficulty allowing the ideas of “art” and “craft” to occupy the same plane when thinking about each of them, both qualities can exist in the same piece. Discussing Chester’s New Design and Bookcase Masterpiece, Jones postulates that, “the chairs demonstrate that the aesthetic impulse existed even in a utilitarian form serving practical purposes” (Jones 79). Jones raises a question asked by Gurney Norman: “‘But are they ‘just chairs,’ pieces of anonymous furniture to sit on and otherwise ignore?’”(Jones 45). The argument for the first possible answer, that Chester’s chairs are purely utilitarian pieces, would be supported by the presence of Chester’s work in homes and households where his chairs are used daily. Upon collecting the designs, Jones realized that “the chairs were not exactly sterling examples of the chairmaker’s art” since many were worn and had paint drips (Jones 46). However, the fact that Chester’s chairs were being sought out for museums suggests another conclusion, that his chairs are art pieces with aesthetic value. In addition, “Gurney Norman had likened Chester’s furniture to the world’s great easel paintings” (Jones 45). This description paints Chester as an artist, wielding his tools expertly, delicate paintbrushes in his hands. However, Chester’s own vision of himself is in conflict with Norman’s view since “Chester identified himself as a chairmaker only, not an artist, an artisan or craftsman” even though he admitted that the aesthetics of making chairs was important to him (Jones 252). Aaron, another chairmaker, shares this view (Jones 253). “[Aaron] allowed...[that] his work might be craft because it was useful” but ultimately decided that art, for him, was limited to painting and sculpture, things he had seen and studied in the classroom (Jones 253). To

Aaron, art was “intended for contemplation rather than use” and thus his chairs would not fit into the definition of “art” (253). Here, a sharp distinction is drawn between what is useful and what has aesthetic value. However, Chester’s Bookcase Masterpiece challenges this idea by existing as something with both utilitarian purpose and aesthetic value.

The Bookcase Masterpiece embodies the dual nature of the craft as both something aesthetic and artistic and as something that is meant to be used. As discussed earlier, Chester planned the piece with Jones in mind as the eventual user; it was designed for an intellectual with a place for books and a pipe (Jones 75). Chester intended the chair to be useful. However, others perceived the chair differently. Other chairmakers mentioned that they would display it in their house as a decoration and not sit in it (54). Ironically, though Chester intended the chair to have a utilitarian purpose, the chair was not very comfortable and due to simple physics, books would fall out of the bookcase part of the chair if someone rocked in it. That being said, even though it ended up being more of an art object in practice, the intention was for it to have both aesthetic value and utilitarian value. To Jones, the chair failing at its original purpose does not nullify its utilitarian value. He explains, “If the masterpiece has become ‘just something to look at,’ it is not because it is useless, but because its form transcends our experiences, transmuting the commonplace into something uncommon indeed” (Jones 77). Even though the other chairmakers saw the chair as something “to be chained to the wall and not sat in” they still envisioned a use for it (Jones 54). They saw it as something they could use to display “Pretties...[or] useless (although not worthless) things, such as flower and pinecone arrangements [and] found objects” (Jones 54). The Bookcase Masterpiece is a striking example of aesthetic and utilitarian values existing in the same piece, perhaps a representation of *shilpa*.

Museum Exhibition

If I were a curator of an art museum choosing a chair for the museum’s collection, the Bookcase Masterpiece would be my first pick for the museum’s collection. Out of all of Chester’s works, the Bookcase Masterpiece seems like the obvious choice given how unique it is and how it is representative of Chester’s abilities and vast skill.

As Jones puts it, “The chair culminates Chester’s endeavors” (Jones 77). Although the chair does not personally appeal to me aesthetically in the sense that I do not look at it and think, “What a pretty chair,” I can appreciate the labor that went into it and Chester’s aesthetic goals, namely making the chair imposing and “heavy and enduring” (Jones 75). The chair also has psychological impact—the colleague of Dr. Kennedy’s who spoke to the class via Skype talked about his moving experience in the chair’s presence and getting to actually sit in the chair. The chair is striking and hard to ignore, what with its abundance of rockers and legs. It is almost a hulking, monstrous object. As a museum curator, it would be important to me to feature objects that draw attention and are visually interesting. Chester’s Bookcase Masterpiece fits this description. The one-of-a-kind nature of the chair also makes it an appealing object to feature in a museum. For Chester, “It is a masterpiece, he says, because of its uniqueness” (Jones 77).



Figure 4 Chester Seated in the Bookcase Masterpiece (Jones 53)

Although Chester's simpler works demonstrate beauty and utilitarian purpose (I find the New Design especially pleasing to the eye), the Bookcase Masterpiece is easily his most ambitious project and it would seem a dishonor to Chester's memory to not display it if given the opportunity. In addition, as a museum goer, something as unusual as the Bookcase Masterpiece would be more likely to draw my interest than Chester's simpler work. As a museum curator interested in creating an appealing exhibit for museum visitors, it seems natural to include something as showstopping as the Bookcase Masterpiece. Although it might be somewhat impractical to obtain and display (a colleague of Dr. Kennedy/s mentioned that he had to drive cross country to bring the piece to the desired location), "The two-in-one, bookcase rocker, masterpiece of furniture testifies to what Chester could accomplish through a lifetime of learning" and for that reason, would be well worth the trouble to add to a museum collection (Jones 77).

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