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### Assembly

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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
School for American Crafts  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN FURNITURE DESIGN

**Assembly**

by

David Flynn

Date: 4/26/17

**Thesis Title:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## **1.1 Proposal**

I am interested in utilitarian objects that encourage and support human gatherings. Within this design research, I aimed to develop a personal language of aesthetics marked by strong graphic moments. These details were created by intersections that occur from the interplay of color, natural wood & geometric form. With wood as the primary material, the transitions between these elements were carefully considered in order to emphasize points of interest and highlight structure as well as function. Each object explored the idea of furniture as a vehicle for interactions through the act of sharing conversation, food and drink.

## **1.2 Abstract**

The primary motive for this body of work was to begin an ongoing study and development of traditional craftsmanship in the realm of furniture design. While the resulting body of work is not necessarily about craft, it is certainly a conversation of understanding craft and traditional techniques. I do not consider myself a master of my own craft, though I do believe that a high level of respect should be given to tradition. In other words, before one can undergo the development of a personal perspective regarding design, I believe it is imperative to take the time to build the proper skills and knowledge. Whatever the craft might be.

Within this was dialogue of furniture, I also engaged myself in the development of a personal aesthetic direction. The presence of influence was heavily considered and recognized, and as a result, the body of work gives a nod to other furniture designers. I also took cues from past design movements including the Art Deco and the Memphis Design group. As color played a large role in each piece, I was also strongly inspired by the works of past and contemporary painters including Josef Albers, and Ellsworth Kelly.

As mentioned in the proposal, the idea of gathering and sharing was also at the center of my research. It came down to understanding how these objects would exist in a living space. This concept served to help me choose which archetypes of furniture pieces to investigate. A dining table supports shared meals, a bar cart promotes shared drinks, armchairs paired with a side table encourages shared conversation and perhaps a shared drink.

## **2.1 Sources & Research**

The initiation point of my studies was based upon an initial study of making, followed by an in-depth study of design. When it comes to the fabrication of an object, no matter the scale, I believe craft and structural understanding comes before design. It's important to be aware of correct construction procedures, and when we're in the conversation of furniture objects, one needs to have a strong understanding of structure. A chair shouldn't be built if it won't hold an individual's mass. Once you have an introductory knowledge of craft & structure, design can begin. Aesthetics can thus develop, and in the process, a developed understanding and a basis of craft will also develop.

Before I can discuss the development of my own aesthetic direction, I'd like to return to the idea of furniture as a vehicle for human interaction. This was a major theme and underlying element within each piece. My aim was to choose archetypes of furniture that support gatherings through the sharing of food, drink and the exchange of conversation. This interest was also extended through a curiosity and enthusiasm for the hospitality industry; restaurants and bars. I'm attracted to the atmospheres that are created and how interaction become natural through the arrangement of furniture and a strong attention to aesthetic details. My goal was to charge this sense of gathering into each furniture piece through my choice of function accompanied by strong visual language.

My thesis body of work officially began with the Ada Bar Cart, named for the pivotal, early 20th- century London bartender, Ada Coleman (try a hanky panky cocktail next time you visit your local craft cocktail bar). As my thesis investigation dealt with the idea of sharing and



Fig. 1 English Bartender Ada Coleman

gathering, I wanted to start out with the development of a bar cart. This focus also served to reflect my interest in the international craft cocktail revival taking place and my hope to share this passion with others. that is presently coming back into popularity with the rise of the cocktail revival. It was a prominent piece found in home living rooms and offices during the “Mad Men” period, when people would display their personal collections of spirits and appropriate glassware for easy access and daily use. I chose to design a bar cart for the modern cocktail enthusiast, equipped with a mixing station, and ample storage for spirits, glassware and bar tools.



Fig. 2. Ada Bar Cart, 2015, Walnut, Maple, Paint, Glass, Corian, Cork L 41" x W 26" x H 38 1/2"

Beyond the inclusion of important functional components, the visual direction was heavily considered as I knew it would likely lay the path for each successive piece in my thesis studies. I ultimately chose to simplify the structural form into very linear members, while accenting the termination points and transitional details. American black walnut was the obvious material to use, as it was a subtle reference to mid-century Modern and Danish Design, where walnut was prominently used. From its inception, another goal was to include materials other than wood. This desire was for aesthetic and logical reasons, as well as a respectful nod to the Italian Memphis Design Group who believed in using a combination of modern materials in their works.

The members of the Memphis Design Movement embraced modern methods of production and modern building materials. When the group's works were first debuted, it was seen as "...a homage to kitsch....a form of neo-classicism....[and] a 30's [as well as] 50's revival." In a way, all of these descriptors were correct. Memphis was very inspired by earlier design movements with a lens on contemporary culture and modern technologies. Their leading

designer, Ettore Sottsass, believed that the fundamental component of his practice was “design as communication [with] the objective of arriving at a closer correspondence between design and culture” (Burney 148). He was very aware of the present, and wanted to offer new ways of experiencing the present through design. Sottsass, as well as the other designers of the group recognized the significance of comprehending past periods of design and reinterpreting such ideas in a contemporary context. Italian designer Gio Ponti held a similar awareness and respect for the past and the present in the context of design. Ponti “played a role in mediating between different times, between tradition and the Modern”. (Roccella 7) He made a constant effort to reinvent himself every decade, to ultimately stay with the times while being rooted in earlier times. I share the same goal, to stay Modern as I look back to the past for inspiration. My objective is to design and build pieces of furniture that reflect my perspective of contemporary culture, with historical references.

The direction of Ada was very much connected to the Memphis design beliefs, with an underlying connection to traditional craft ideas. Every connection detail was carefully considered to provide maximum strength and durability. Each material was specifically chosen to reference the functional aspects of the piece. The storage surfaces are painted plywood with a layer of 1/4” glass, which references the use of storage for glass bottles and space for glassware. The white Corian surface on top is a material reference to kitchen or bar countertops. It serves as a space for the preparation of food and beverages. Corian is a durable, waterproof surface that is perfectly suited to this function. The maroon accents lead the eyes to the functional importance of the stemware rack and the cork-lined drawer for assorted cocktail mixing tools. The vivid cerulean blue of the maple dowels highlight the perimeter of the shelving units, which helps to keep bottles and glassware from falling off the cart.



When looking at my furniture works, it's obvious that color plays an essential role in my process. As I was considering the use of color with each piece of furniture, the main thing that I was focused on was a sense of balance. This could have manifested itself in a balance of loud, contrasting hues or I might have aimed for more of a subtle sense of balance. In each case, the choice of color was meant to compliment the tones of the hardwood I chose to use. I found that specific colors accompany certain wood grains more successfully. The right tones can bring out the range of colors found in each wood species. For example, shades of cerulean blue bring out the rich purples, oranges and deep browns found in American Black Walnut. The idea of how each piece interacts in a living space also played a huge role in the color selection process. While I wanted there to be moments of "pop" in each piece, I didn't necessarily want them to "pop" in a living space. They needed to be able to work with other pieces of furniture, all of varying periods, styles and materials.

Within the conversation of color and other aesthetic choices, the idea of "ornamentation" becomes relevant and significant. In regards to the Ada bar cart, the ornamentation is quite minimal. The majority of the piece was constructed from rectilinear components which transition into extruded circular members. Apart from these details, the main ornamentation is supplied by the use of color. There is no organic shaping to the wooden components, everything is quite rectilinear. The ornamentation and richness is supplied through the thoughtful transitions between natural wood and color, as well as the visual weight of each component.

The idea of visual weight is another important idea connected to the overarching concept of balance. The piece that followed Ada, the Mable bar table, contended with the challenge of achieving balance through the awareness of visual weight. The bar table focused on the use of separate shapes and components which were broken down by the contrast between color and natural wood. One of the main goals for Mable was to design and construct a table that was

well-suited for both a residential setting as well as a commercial setting, such as a restaurant or a bar.



Fig. .3 Mable Bar Table, 2016, maple, steel paint L 36" x W 36" x H 42"



Fig 4. Eero Saarinen Tulip Table

The bar table was visually inspired by the Eero Saarinen Tulip Table, which I believe was inspired by classic diner style round-top tables that utilize a single-post system for their main structure. It's undeniable that this piece was certainly more visually louder as a result of the use of multiple bold colors and contrasting shapes. My main intention for this piece was to focus on the idea of "building blocks". The structure was presented as an assemblage of components simplified by form and color. Each adjoining, separate component was either natural maple, or painted a solid color, thus dematerializing the component. In terms of color choices, I was attempting to explore a broader range of values with this piece, which I think resulted in a very lively, playful aesthetic.

At the halfway point of completion with Mable, I decided to start the production of the Ludwig dining table. During the design process, I chose to step back for a moment to evaluate the direction of my aesthetic progression. I recognized a connection to the design elements of the Art Deco period of design. Art Deco was an aesthetic movement that developed in the 1920s and "responded to the demands of the machine and of new materials such as plastics and vita-glass " (Hiller 11). In a way, it was visually in opposition to the Art Deco movement. While Art Nouveau works dealt with flowing, organic, curvilinear lines and shapes, Art Deco art and design was more austere, with simplified and streamlined forms and strong lines. This association with my own work was something I was not aware of previously. I thought it would be interesting to embrace this discovery and reference it further in the dining table. I found an affinity for the works of Austrian designer Josef Hoffmann as I was researching this period. I would argue that he was one of the major figures to lay the path for the Modernist movements of the 20th century. He stood out to me as a designer who was profoundly ahead of his time. He's described as an individual who made a point in his work to "[turn] away from historicism....by

rejecting functionalism”. (Sarnitz 10). The Ludwig table was designed using his works as inspiration, as well as some of the major motifs from the Art Deco period. Once again, I aimed to keep an awareness of past periods while presenting my views in a contemporary context.



Fig. 5. Ludwig Dining Table, 2016, maple, poplar, paint L 80" x W 32" x H 30"

To finish off my thesis body of work, I chose to revisit the aesthetics of the bar cart by applying its language to the development of a side table to accompany my existing armchair design. My main intention was to design a piece that utilized multiple materials and still possessed the simple forms with an accent of color. I was aiming at achieving an overall visual balance in a somewhat chaotic combination of elements. Each component was carefully considered so that each visual decision would support the next. The edge of the glass has a green hue which accents the green painted dowels. The color of the leather complements the warm natural tones of the steamed beech. The bleached maple was chosen in hopes that it would appear visually lighter than the glass surface and the primary structure. For aesthetic

inspiration, I looked to classic British automobile design of the 50s and 60s, specifically the beautiful details of the Aston Martin coupe and Jaguar E-types, referencing their rich, regal colors and fine materials.



Fig. 6. Hemmy Side Table, 2016, Steamed Beech, glass, leather, pickled maple, paint L 28 1/2" x W 19" x H 22 3/4"

### III. Critical Analysis

I chose to use wood as my primary building material. This was a decision I made at the initiation point of my thesis year. Not only is it important to me that I respect the traditions of the furniture design program in the School for American Crafts, but also to appreciate the history of furniture made with wood. I'm primarily using traditional joinery methods that are time tested and incredibly structural. Beyond the use of wood, my choice of surface treatment and finishing was incredibly important to my process as well. To some individuals, applying paint directly to the surface of the wood might seem heinous, but people have been doing it for centuries. The Shakers often painted their furniture with traditional milk paint, using colors that were dictated by

their specific sect. Ultimately, I used color to compliment the human environment. Naturally, a totally black armchair has a very different presence in a living room than a black armchair with cerulean blue accents and a neutral blue upholstered seat. They offer very different overall moods, and they have different effects on the viewer's eye path, as well as the overall atmosphere and experience.

The simple, geometric forms were very much inspired by the works of hard edge and color field Modern painters such as Josef Albers, and Ellsworth Kelly. Albers was best known for his "Homages to the Square". He described these pieces as "platters to serve color": vehicles for the presentation of different color climates and various color effects.....simple yet significant" (Fox 14). The effect of different materials, colors and visual textures in direct proximity was intriguing during this exploration. These seemingly very simple large scale blocks of juxtaposing colors are incredibly moving, poetic, and entirely change the feel of an interior environment. Ellsworth Kelly's works have a very similar feel, as they also deal with color blocking and color fields. He presented a new and "inventive approach to abstraction" of "flat planes of rectilinear color" (Paik 6).



Fig. 7. Orange and Gray 1993 by Ellsworth Kelly



Fig. 8. Black Bar For A Wall by Ellsworth Kelly

Each artist had their own subjects and concepts, although they share some aesthetic similarities. In general, each individual created paintings that deal with large fields of solid colors that build flat picture planes. When translating these ideas into a discussion of design, my eye was drawn to the simple geometric color forms that these painters use to create their “fields”. The simple language of the shapes allow for a more easily examined relationship between the chosen colors. I also used these types of simple forms in the hopes of building an accessible yet stimulating visual language.

The composition of the Mable bar table was greatly inspired by the paintings of Ellsworth Kelly and the design work of Ettore Sottsass. When designing the structure of the table, I was studying Kelly’s minimal geometric forms which he places in close proximity, in a vivid selection of colors. This ultimately transforms the wall into the picture’s ground, similar to the way that furniture interacts directly with an interior space. The presence that my furniture pieces might have in a space is another huge consideration through the design process. The boldness of

each piece suggest a very specific type of interior, perhaps with more modern and design-forward attributes.

From piece to piece, I was experimenting with different levels of visual boldness. For example, with the 923 CW9 Edition armchair, I was attempting to create a piece that was more visually subtle and quiet in nature. To achieve this, I paired the blackened leather-dyed ash with tones of light cerulean blue in the choice of the upholstery and the accent paint additions. While the blue is a bold color, the chair has a quality that I believe allows it to harmoniously exist in an interior space among other pieces of furniture and decor. On the opposite side of the spectrum, the 923 Gulf Edition armchair does the very opposite with bold, perhaps heavy handed contrasting colors. The first version of the Mable bar table also plays with this bold presence, first and foremost as a result of the diverse color palette but also as a result of the bold interconnected forms. These 3 pieces exist in heavily differing ways when placed in an interior space filled with other pieces of furniture and decorative objects.



Fig. 9. 923 Armchair CW9 Edition , 2015, Dyed Ash, wool, paint L 21" x W 26 3/4" x H 32"



The gathering and researching of specific visual sources was also an important part of my design process. Each piece has multiple references used as design inspiration, ranging from historical pieces of furniture, to classic car design, to the color palettes of different paintings. My most recent piece, the Hemmy side table, took inspiration from classic automobiles and motorcycles. The material choices are connected to classic Jaguar and Aston Martin race cars as well as WWII-era Indian motorcycles. The green dowels referenced the signature British racing green color. The glass circle referenced the simple single tier windshields on classic convertibles. The russet-colored leather referenced the interiors of classic speedsters as well as the leather saddlebags on the Indian motorcycles. The steamed European beech referenced the tone of woods used for the interior components found in automobiles during this era.

The naming process for each piece was an important and very enjoyable finishing touch. The majority of the piece's names referenced the initial research development as well as the theme of sharing and gathering around food and drink. The Ludwig dining table was named for King Ludwig I of Bavarian Germany who held the first Oktoberfest in 1810. The structure and composition of the table was inspired by the large, sturdy trestle-style tables used in German beer gardens. The 923 CW9 Edition was inspired by the works of Italian designer and Architect Gio Ponti who debuted his works at an Italian Biennale in 1923. It was also inspired by the first year of the French automobile race held on the island of Le Mans, first held in 1923. The color composition of the CW9 edition was inspired by the blue and black livery of the first car that won the 24-Hour Le Mans race in France.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

As a whole, my thesis body of work can be broken down into three main parts. The first surrounded the idea of gathering and sharing, which served as an aid for choosing which archetype of furniture to design. The second was a study of form, which resulted in the development of a visual language derived from simplicity and geometry. The third and perhaps most apparent part was the investigation of “how to use color”, and “where to use color”. Each piece took a slightly different approach to these constructs.

The notion of timelessness was also undeniably a constant subject of contemplation in regards to each successive piece. Rather than evaluating every single decision in attempt to achieve some form of ultimate understanding, it’s simply on to the next piece, on to the next idea, on to the next aesthetic direction. This in turn brings forth the most important question, what comes next after such a considerable venture? The search for a solution and a setting that allows me to continue designing and producing. Beyond that, I feel that designing and building out the entirety of an interior space, in particular a restaurant or bar setting, would be an incredibly rewarding challenge. Having total control over each detail in a space, with close consideration to every relationship between different pieces of furniture and other aesthetic details. On top of the visual design, the architecture of atmosphere and composing experience within a space seems to be the apex of my curiosity and a logical objective to work towards.

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