EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: Elevating the Everyday
Subject: Garry Knox Bennett
Discipline: Visual Arts (Handcrafted Furniture)

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Furniture artist Garry Knox Bennet fits the seat and arms on a new chair piece. Still image from SPARK story, January 2005.
EPISODE THEME
Elevating the Everyday

SUBJECT
Garry Knox Bennett

GRADE RANGES
K–12 & Post-Secondary

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS
Visual Arts
Social Studies

OBJECTIVE
To introduce students to artist-made furniture as a union of art and design through the work of Garry Knox Bennett

STORY SYNOPSIS
For more than three decades, Garry Knox Bennett has been at the vanguard of furniture making with his unusual tables, desks, chairs, clocks, and lamps. Spark visits the artist at work as he produces the last in a series of fifty chairs for an upcoming exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California.

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES
To provide opportunities for considering how art relates to and plays important roles in daily life
To encourage students to look closely at and respond to the contributions of artists in the world around them
To inspire students to consider how ordinary objects can be made extraordinary
To provoke discussion about the interrelationships between art and design
To help students articulate the relationships between form and function from a design perspective

EQUIPMENT NEEDED
SPARK story about Garry Knox Bennett on DVD or VHS, and related equipment
Computer with Internet access, navigation software, speakers and a sounds card, printer
Samples of artist-made furniture and woodworking in books and on the Internet

MATERIALS NEEDED
Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
Pencils, pens, and paper

INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED
Bodily-Kinesthetic - control of one’s own body, control in handling objects
Intrapersonal - awareness of one’s own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
Spatial - ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems
Logical-Mathematical - ability to detect patterns, reason deductively, think logically

See more information on Multiple Intelligences at www.kqed.org/spark/education.
CONTENT OVERVIEW

For more than three decades, Garry Knox Bennett has been at the vanguard of furniture making with his unusual tables, desks, chairs, clocks, and lamps. Working in the face of woodworking purists, Bennett became one of the first furniture craftsmen to use Formica, plastic, aluminum, and other unconventional materials in his pieces. Spark visits the artist at work as he produces the last in a series of fifty chairs for an upcoming exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California.

Bennett has gained a reputation as something of a revolutionary in the world of woodworking for his pioneering use of different materials and styles in single objects. In a field that values longstanding tradition over daring innovation, Bennett’s bold and often whimsical creations stand far outside established woodworking practices.

Bennett’s standing as a rebel is perhaps best demonstrated in his 1979 piece, Nail Cabinet. In part as a response to the woodworking mainstream, Bennett produced a lavishly crafted cabinet that rivaled even the most canonical examples of the form. When the piece had been finished, down to its most minute details, Bennett drove a large nail into the cabinet’s door, creating a scandal amongst the more traditional “woodies.”

Bennett’s latest series, composed of fifty chairs for an exhibition at the Oakland Museum, reveals an eclectic mix of influences and styles. Several of the chairs re-work artist Gerrit Reitveld’s 1934 design classic Zig-Zag chair, while others offer innovative modifications to standard mass-produced garden and lawn chairs. The diversity of pieces is a reflection of Bennett’s working method: rather than begin with sketches and drawings, Bennett goes straight to the materials, working them part by part into a finished idea. It is a material-centric technique that provides Bennett the freedom to change direction in a piece several times before it is complete, responding to the materials and ways in which they look and feel together.

In addition to being a renowned master craftsman and innovator, Bennett is also a collector of rare and unusual furnishings and decorative objects. He and his wife Sylvia share a collection that spans forty years, a selection of which formed the inaugural show at San Francisco’s new Museum of Craft and Design, “Dovetailing Art and Life: The Bennett Collection.”

Garry Knox Bennett studied drawing and painting at the California College of Arts and Crafts in the early 1960s, although he is largely self-taught, learning to make sculpture first by teaching himself to weld, then by teaching himself woodworking. Bennett’s pieces can be seen in major collections throughout the United States.

THE BIG PICTURE

Garry Knox Bennett’s work bridges the gap between the decorative and fine arts, being both functional furniture and sculpture. In an era when most of the objects in our daily lives are mass produced, handmade furniture and other objects have
increasingly gained recognition as art in their own right. Artist-made furniture is an arena of cultural production that crosses the history of furniture and craft as well as the history of art. People have been making furniture since the earliest beginnings of society. In the generations before the Industrial Revolution, all furniture was made by hand, including the pieces used by upper and lower classes. Once mechanized reproduction made production easier and more affordable, handmade and one-of-a-kind furniture became more of a luxury item accessible to those with disposable income, such as the aristocracy, clergy, and later, the merchant classes.

The Industrial Revolution brought a number of significant innovations that transformed society immeasurably, including: the railroad, telegraph, and steamships, which made a volume flow of goods possible; electricity, which replaced steam to power industrial machinery, trolleys and subways, and lights for factories, offices, and peoples homes; new industrial processes used to create new and improved consumer and industrial products.

When furniture production became mechanized during the early 19th century, it democratized access to fine furniture by making it cheaper to produce, and more attainable to a wider range of consumers. At the same time, furniture designs became more streamlined in order to meet the limitations of the machines and the demand for product. Hand-made furniture became less common and more expensive by comparison.

In response, some furniture makers sought to return to an earlier era of production when pieces were made individually, in regional styles. William Morris’ Arts & Crafts Movement in England in the late 19th century was an organized movement of artists allied in their belief that handmade crafts were vitally important in people’s daily lives. Artists of the movement created elegant designs based on organic forms found in English folk art in all their pieces, including furniture, wallpaper, book design, lamps, and jewelry. The artists and craftsmen associated with the movement valued wood for its inherent qualities and natural grain, which offered a beauty they believed absent from the new materials used in industrial production: steel and glass.

Other designers used techniques of mass production to create a new kind of design, based in an elegant functionalism. The more forward looking modern movements of the early 20th century such as the German Werkbund and the Bauhaus manipulated wood in a new way to create their designs, choosing it for the beauty of its natural grain, but shaping it into clean modernist forms intended to clearly and beautifully express function and construction.

Often, Bauhaus and Werkbund designs would combine organic materials such as wood and leather with industrial ones to produce beautiful results, as in Marcel Breuer’s Wassily Chair, made from bent, nickel-plated tubular steel (called nickelled steel) and leather or canvas. All of the furniture and other products designed by Werkbund and Bauhaus artists were produced in limited numbers by artists, a tradition which remains true today.

Bennett acknowledges the artists who helped to establish the art-furniture tradition, including Gerrit Rietveld, maker of the famous Zig-Zag chair (1934). Bennett paid tribute in Rietveld’s chair in the works to be exhibited at the Oakland Museum in 2005. In Bennett’s Ladderback Chair the artist has used the Rietveld’s core zigzag shaped chair design but added a scaled wooden ladder which extends upwards from the back of the chair, perhaps representing visually how furniture makers, like all artists build on one another’s ideas and innovations throughout history.

Gerrit Rietveld, Zig Zag chair, 1934. Wood.

Garry Knox Bennett, Ladderback Chair.

Garry Knox Bennett, Ladderback Chair.
RESOURCES – TEXTS


RESOURCES – WEB SITES
Absolute Arts – Arts Web site featuring articles, resources and images, including an article about Bennett’s Oakland Museum exhibition - http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2001/06/09/28678.html

American Craft Council - An organization dedicated to promoting understanding and appreciation of contemporary American craft - http://www.craftcouncil.org

Bauhaus Archiv Museum of Design - http://www.bauhaus.de/english


Popular Woodworking Magazine – An online magazine with links to books and information about woodworking - http://www.popularwoodworking.com


Wood Magazine – An online magazine with many downloadable articles and plans - http://www.woodmagazine.com

Wood Zone – A Web site designed to help beginners learn the basics of working with wood - http://www.woodzone.com

Woodweb – A working industry website with lots of useful information - http://www.woodweb.com

Woodworking – A Web site with lots of tips and a fun woodworking trivia maze - http://www.woodworking.org

BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF)
De Young Museum
Palace of the Legion of Honor
75 Tea Garden Drive
Golden Gate Park
San Francisco, CA
415/682.2481
http://www.thinker.org

Oakland Museum of California
10th and Oak Street, Oakland
510/238.2200
http://www.museumca.org
San Francisco Museum of Craft and Design
550 Sutter Street, San Francisco
415/773.0303
http://www.sfmcd.org

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
151 Third Street (between Harrison and Mission)
415/357.4000
Streets), San Francisco, CA 94103
http://www.sfmoma.org

San Jose Museum of Art
110 South Market Street,
San Jose, CA 95113,
408/271-6840 or 408/294-2787
http://www.sjmusart.org
SECTION III – VOCABULARY

DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

Aesthetic
Artistic, beautiful or pleasing to the eye

Aluminum
Very light weight, silver-white metallic element, which is an excellent conductor of electricity and resistant to tarnish and oxidation

Array
Range, selection, collection, assortment

Formica
Trademark for a plastic covering which is resistant to water, heat and most chemicals, used on kitchen and bathroom surfaces and other furniture. It became very popular in the 1950s

Functional
Useful, practical, efficient, well designed

Galvanized steel
Cover (iron or) steel with a thin coating of zinc to prevent rust

Gucci
Luxury designer wear

Inaugural
Opening, introductory, initial

Inlay
Set in, engraved, cut into as decoration

Marquetry
The use of veneer and other inlays to make decorative patterns in wood

Multitude
Mass or huge amount

Prolific
Productive, fruitful

Rectilinear
Bounded or formed by straight lines

Gerrit Reitveld
Dutch architect famous for the iconic Zigzag chair designed and built by him in 1934

Renegade
Rebel turncoat, defector, or deserter from a political party

Retrospective
Looking back on the past – in relation to artwork the term is used for an art exhibit that reviews the work of an artist during a former period in his or her career

Trestle table
Framework used for the support for a tabletop Braced framework of timber or steel

Unconventional
Unusual, eccentric odd, irregular not conforming to accepted norms and values

Upholstery
Coverings for furniture, curtains, cushions, carpets hangings etc.
SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Thinking about Craft v Manufacture
Hand each student an object or picture and ask them to decide if their object was:

- Manufactured in a factory e.g. stapler, lamp, paper clip, chair
- Not made by people but from nature e.g. stones, pine cones
- Made by hand by an artist (like a painter, sculptor) or a craftsperson (like a weaver, knitter, furniture-maker)

Ask students about the factory-made products. Who thinks up the ideas and decides how these products work and should look? Introduce the idea of the industrial designer and discuss the designer’s role.

Hold up the different examples of mass-produced objects and ask students to identify traits that the industrial designer had to think about such as color, shape, comfort etc. Direct the discussion to include the way the object works, what it looks like, the textures and materials it is made from and the safety features if there are any. The intention is to explain the industrial designer’s role and process.

Play the SPARK episode on Garry Knox Bennett pausing on the sequence that focuses on his 50 handcrafted chairs. Alternatively use a projector to show students the images of his lamps on the Web site at http://www.terceragallery.com/artists/bennett/bennett5.html or http://www.furnituresociety.org/cs/jun2001/oakland.html

Invite students to explore the difference between these handmade pieces and the products produced in a factory. It may be useful to also compare a classroom chair with an image of a chair produced by Garry Knox Bennett. How do these objects differ in look? Do they differ in the way they are made? What of the level of skill involved in their production? What distinguishes an object produced by a craftsperson from an object conceived by an industrial designer? Is the intent different?

Ask students to write a 500-word description of one example of Garry Knox Bennett’s work (a table, clock, chair, lamp etc) drawing upon the design features identified above. Their work should include a personal response to the piece and observations as to why the work is unusual or unconventional.

Invite them to share their ideas for discussion with the whole group.

SPARKLER:
* Garry Knox Bennett clearly states “I’m not an artist. I am a furniture maker.” Initiate a discussion on art v craft. How would students differentiate between them? What defines an art and what defines a craft? Do they overlap? Is this a cultural distinction? Is there a difference in perception of art and craft by the art world and public opinion? Is this changing in the contemporary world and why might that be?

Encourage students to use examples wherever possible to support their arguments and observations.

SPARKLER:
* Suggest that students visits San Francisco Museum of Craft and Design - 550 Sutter Street (between Mason and Powell), San Francisco, CA 94102 http://www.sfmcd.org/
Ask them to report back to the class on one of the exhibits they view at the gallery. Illustrative material from the Museum would enrich their report.

**Modern and Futuristic Design**
Designers dream up the products of tomorrow. For the most part they making drawings and models of things we may use in the future. Show students magazine photos of modern and futuristic products and ask them about the newest things they have seen or heard about.

Similarly craftspeople like Garry Knox Bennett explore the cutting edge of design in their imaginings and skill in juxtaposing ideas and unusual, often discordant, materials in their work. For example Bennett uses Formica, aluminum, brick, brass, plastic and objects from everyday life in his work.

Suggest that students work in teams of three or four to create a futuristic product, encouraging them to range as widely as they want in their choice of product and in their selection of materials. Remind them to draw on materials they use everyday in their design and to think about unexpected shapes and angles, visual surprises and contrasting colors etc.

Each group should produce a summary of their idea and a sketch or drawing of the product. They should also list the materials they would work with. If the materials are available, students could be encouraged to produce a model of their idea.

Invite each group to display their sketch and/or drawing (and model) and present their concept to the whole group to critique. Consider inviting students from another class or group to attend the presentations and award commendation to the most futuristic or avant-garde concept.

If the materials are to hand or easily acquired invite the team, and other students who would like to help, to craft the product.
Tips for Successful Critiques
Learning to critique or assess other student’s artwork is a skill. It takes practice and sensitivity to ensure respectful, beneficial critiquing. Display the artworks clearly, in this instance pinning or taping the sketches/drawings to a board so they are clearly visible. Some students may be uncomfortable displaying their artworks so it may be appropriate to begin by invitation. Students will want to participate if the process is seen to be unthreatening and supportive.

Discuss ground rules for the style of questions, comments and suggestions to ensure courteous and constructive feedback and encourage positive phrasing. The focus should be on each artwork’s strengths and suggestions that could enrich the impact of the piece. Emphasize the learning process rather than the final result.

It may help for students to brainstorm appropriate phrasing before beginning the exercise. For example:

- What really caught my eye was_____
- That artwork shows________ really well
- I think_____would improve that artwork.
- I’d like to see more of________
- That artist is really skilled at________
- I am a little confused by________

(Adapted from Teach Art at http://www.sanford-artedventures.com/teach/lp_transportation.html)

Garry Knox Bennett in Historical Context
(9-12th grades)
Garry Knox Bennett’s chair series, Garry Knox Bennett: Preoccupations of a Serial Chairmaker, exhibited at Gallery 555 Oakland Museum of CA (OMCA) Sculpture Court (January 20-March 25, 2005) is inspired by well-known furniture makers – Philippe Starck and architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Gerrit Reitveld. Some are purely contrived from his imagination.

Invite students to work in groups to research furniture makers and design movements that have explored innovative ways to fashion furniture from wood. Direct students to the resources listed in this guide for assistance with their research. Ensure all of the following are assigned to at least one group, although more than one group can work on the same topic.

- The Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th century
- The Bauhaus School
- The Shaker style

http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/shaker/shakerstyle.htm
- The furniture of Frank Lloyd Wright OR Philippe Starck

Each group should prepare a presentation on the movement or individual designer researched to include a summary of the principles and key ideas underpinning the approach to design, an analysis of the aesthetic or style, illustrations of the work and a brief reference to the historical context. Presentations should be allocated at least 20 minutes each to allow time for questions and discussion.

Conclude with a discussion of Garry Knox Bennett’s work and how it can be placed within this contemporary woodworking tradition – if at all.

RELATED STANDARDS
LANGUAGE ARTS
Grades 9 & 10
1.0 LISTENING AND SPEAKING STRATEGIES
1.1 Formulate judgments about the ideas under discussion and support those judgments with convincing evidence.
1.0 WRITING STRATEGIES
1.1 Establish a controlling impression or coherent thesis that conveys a clear and distinctive perspective on the subject and maintain a consistent tone and focus throughout the piece of writing.
1.3 Use clear research questions and suitable research methods (e.g., library, electronic media, personal interview) to elicit and present evidence from primary and secondary sources.

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at http://www.kqed.org/spark/education.

For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education at http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/index.asp.