

## EDUCATOR GUIDE

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

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Furniture artist Garry Knox Bennett fits the seat and arms on a new chair piece. Still image from SPARK story, January 2005.

## SECTION I - OVERVIEW

### 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 STRATEGIES

Group oral discussion, review and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing  
Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance  
Hands-on individual projects in which students work independently  
Hands-on group projects in which students assist and support one another

### 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](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education).

## SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

### 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."



Artist Garry Knox Bennett works on a piece in his studio. Still image from SPARK story, 2005.

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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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,  
<http://www.furniture-society.org/cs/nov2004/sanfran4.html>

## RESOURCES – TEXTS

Aronson, Joseph. The Encyclopedia of Furniture. New York: Random House, 1999.

Bennett, Garry Knox, et al. Made in Oakland: The Furniture of Garry Knox Bennett. New York: American Craft Museum, 2001.

Droste, Magdalena. Bauhaus: 1919-1933. New York and Berlin: Bauhaus Archiv, 2002.

Fike, Bonita. The Fine Art of Wood. New York: Abbeville Press, 2000.

Lucie-Smith, Edward. Furniture: A Concise History. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985.

Meilach, Dona Z. Wood Art Today: Furniture, Vessels, Sculpture. Surrey, UK: Schiffer Publishing, 2003.

Morley, John. Furniture, the Western Tradition: History, Style, Design. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999.

## 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>

Furniture Society – A Web site devoted to the fine art of furniture making, with information about exhibitions, collecting, and resources - <http://www.furnitureociety.org> – including a page with two images of Garry Knox Bennett’s work - <http://www.furnitureociety.org/cs/jan2005/oakland.html>

Oakland Museum – Archived pages from the 2001 exhibition of Bennett’s work - [http://www.museumca.org/exhibit/exhi\\_gkb.html](http://www.museumca.org/exhibit/exhi_gkb.html)

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

San Francisco Museum of Craft & Design - <http://www.sfmcd.org>

William Morris Society – A society dedicated to the preservation of William Morris’ Arts & Crafts Movement and other related artists - <http://www.morrissociety.org>

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  
10<sup>th</sup> 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 craftsman (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 hand crafted 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 craftsman 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 am 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 visit 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.

### **RELATED STANDARDS**

#### **VISUAL ARTS**

##### Kindergarten

##### 1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

1.1 Recognize and describe simple patterns found in the environment and works of art.

##### Grade 1

##### 5.0 CONNECTIONS, RELATIONS & APPLICATIONS

5.4 Describe objects designed by artists (e.g., furniture, appliances, cars) that are used at home and at school.

##### Grade 4

##### 1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

1.5 Describe and analyze the elements of art (color, shape/form, line, texture, space and value), emphasizing form, as they are used in works of art and found in the environment.

##### Grade 6

##### 2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

2.1 Use various observational drawing skills to depict a variety of subject matter.

##### Grade 8

##### 1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

1.1 Use artistic terms when describing the intent and content of works of art.

##### 4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

4.2 Develop a theory about the artist's intent in a series of works of art, using reasoned statements to support personal opinions.

4.3 Construct an interpretation of a work of art based on the form and content of the work

##### Grades 9-12 Proficient

##### 3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

3.3 Identify and describe trends in the visual arts and discuss how the issues of time, place, and cultural influence are reflected in selected works of art.

##### Grades 9-12 Advanced

##### 3.0 HISTORICAL & CULTURAL CONTEXTS

3.2 Identify contemporary artists worldwide who have achieved regional, national, or international recognition and discuss ways in which their work reflects, plays a role in, and influences present-day culture.

## 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](http://www.sanford-artedventures.com/teach/lp_transportation.html))

## Garry Knox Bennett in Historical Context

(9-12<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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>.