

QUALITY *is* CONTAGIOUS

John Economaki and Bridge City Tool Works

ON VIEW

August 16, 2013

THROUGH

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VAUGHN STREET DESSERT TROLLEY
1979

John Economaki
Photo: Dan Kvitka

WHY.

Namita Gupta Wiggers

Director and Chief Curator, Museum of Contemporary Craft
in Partnership with Pacific Northwest College of Art

A tool has a function when it's not in use, because that's most of the time.

John Economaki

Why would a museum exhibit tools? At Museum of Contemporary Craft, we prefer to ask when might a museum exhibit tools. That moment, for us, is when the tools exemplify values in keeping with an institutional goal to create exhibitions that show how craft and design intersect. John Economaki's story is a decades long demonstration of dedication, entrepreneurship, innovation and experimentation. We know this publication and exhibition will inspire woodworkers, furnituremakers, photographers, and inventors. But we believe it will also inspire anyone who needs courage and conviction to change careers; who seeks business advice from someone who has experienced ups and downs; and those who doubt that handcrafting and technology are partners today and in the future.

Every trade has its tools. Whether you are a chef or a dressmaker, potter or a writer, there are specific tools which enable successful completion of specialized tasks. The use of these tools leads to a memorable meal, beautiful garment, bowl or novel. We believe in good tools. We trust that they will provide reliable service in the construction of a quality finished product. What if the tool itself, however, is just as finely crafted, just as aesthetically compelling as it is functional? For the past 30 years, artist, furniture-maker, toolmaker, and businessman John Economaki has built his life and business around a core idea: a tool should be as compelling when not in use as it is when serving its' intended purpose. In other words, a tool must be as beautiful an object as the objects it is used to create. John Economaki's ongoing commitment to this idea is precisely why the Museum of Contemporary Craft organized an exhibition to share his story through the tools of Bridge City Tool Works with the community.

John's insatiable curiosity and drive to improve any thing around him is contagious. Everything is fair game for redesign. Listening to John rapidly explain shortcomings and opportunities with any tool is infectious and educational. He can articulate exactly how he intends to improve the tool in question, clearly describing how he can bring artistry to form and function. After just a short time with John, it would be nearly impossible not to believe that he could transform a successful furniture-making studio into an heirloom tool making business in a few short months.

Museum of Contemporary Craft
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To say that the transition was overnight is no exaggeration. In the late 1970s, John found success as an artist who made beautifully crafted furniture, His work was

included in *Portland Crafts Exhibition* in Sapporo, Japan (1979), and his signature NUTCRACKER (1980) was acquired by the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution after inclusion in a juried exhibition there. Known today as Museum of Contemporary Craft in partnership with Pacific Northwest College of Art, the Museum was founded in 1937 as the Oregon Ceramic Studio, and renamed Contemporary Crafts Gallery (CCG) in 1964. A furniture-focused exhibition at Contemporary Crafts Gallery in October 1981, and two one-person exhibitions in California in 1982 were followed by a one-person show at the Elaine Potter Gallery in San Francisco, exhibitions in New York, and commissions from as far away as Tokyo.¹ The Museum of Contemporary Craft is proud that one of John's most successful designs, VAUGHN STREET DESSERT TROLLEY (1979), is part of its collection and featured in *Unpacking the Collection: Selections from the Museum of Contemporary Craft* (2008).

In 1983, John became ill with pneumonia, brought on from an allergy to his medium of choice: Rosewood. Based on medical assessments, he could not return to the studio to complete numerous commissions and scheduled exhibitions. Of these, one exhibition commitment was fulfilled, and a quick review of the names on the announcement reveals that John Economaki wasn't giving up just any studio practice. His medical condition meant removing himself from the company of some of the most reputable furniture makers in the American Craft Movement: Gary Knox Bennett, John Cederquist, Sam Maloof, and Wendy Maruyama are only a few of the artists on this list who are recognized today as some of the most influential furniture makers of recent decades. When Jo Lauria included John Economaki's TROLLEY in the publication *Craft in America*, it underscored his importance today as a part of the history of contemporary studio furniture.

While it is as a furniture maker that John's relationship began with Museum of Contemporary Craft, it is his approach to toolmaking that prompted MoCC to develop a retrospective exhibition to share his story with the community-at-large. Nicole Nathan, Curator of Collections and Registrar organized the exhibition and accompanying programs to demonstrate John's unique position as an artist who can successfully shift and apply his intimate knowledge of how a tool must perform for a maker to how to make a tool itself. John understands and combines the way a tool must feel in the hands of a woodworker with his artist's understanding of how that tool must look so a collector of tools must have it. And because of his strong aesthetic sensibilities and personal philosophies regarding beauty in all things with which one surrounds oneself, any tool made by John is an object of beauty and desire in its own right.

This, however, is only a part of why the Museum believes John Economaki and Bridge City Tool Works makes sense for an exhibition and publication. John is tenacious, innovative, and experimental. An early adopter of CAD design and 3-D modeling and printing, his work flows seamlessly from sketches to a working prototype. Here, technology services the hand – John's tools do not require any power other than the maker's hands. They open a space for creative exploration while exemplifying creative application of technology. John has the ability to balance his own aesthetic vision with a customer-centered approach; this distinguishes his furniture in much the same way his tools stand out in a unique niche market of independent toolmakers.

Museum of Contemporary Craft is known as an institution which honors the distinctive craft-based design legacy of the Pacific Northwest. It is a legacy which John Economaki helped establish – as a schoolteacher, furniture maker, one-time MoCC Board Member, and as a businessman who turned his passion for working with his hands into a multi-million dollar business that helps others cultivate their own passion for hand woodworking. This publication, lavishly filled with Joe Felzman's exquisite photographs will inspire collectors who preserve the carefully designed tools for which Bridge City Tool Works is recognized as a pioneer, and provide an aspirational model for anyone who, like John, doesn't "want to surround myself with anything that isn't passionately made."² At MoCC, we believe that this story of a studio furniture maker who transitioned nearly overnight into a successful toolmaker and businessman with international clientele will educate and inspire future generations to aim to be the best in their field, and, hopefully, to seize opportunities to live a life of creative practice. This is a local story told through John's voice and Joe's lens – a story which we know will have an impact far beyond Oregon.

[1] Archives of Museum of Contemporary Craft in partnership with Pacific Northwest College of Art.

[2] Interview with John Economaki, Joe Felzman, Nicole Nathan, and Namita Gupta Wiggers, February 16, 2013.