

LOOK.

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in Partnership with Pacific Northwest College of Art

QUALITY *is* CONTAGIOUS

John Economaki and Bridge City Tool Works

ON VIEW

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THROUGH

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A life of creative practice. We hear that phrase and think we know what it means. Naming an example seems easy. But naming someone whose life moves beyond glimpses and flashes to exemplify a holistic way of life where every aspect is true to that principle is challenging.

What has become clear to me as I research and develop the exhibition *Quality is Contagious* is that John Economaki manifests this principle – through his furniture, his designs for Bridge City Tool Works, and his approach to life. John approaches everything he does so with the same methodology: intellectual curiosity through the lens of artist and maker, designer and entrepreneur. Our goal at Museum of Contemporary Craft is to create an exhibition which communicates all aspects of John Economaki's approach to work and life by combining his furniture, tools, sketches, prototypes, Joe Felzman's photographs, videos, and interactive programs to give visitors the opportunity to understand the life and work of this innovative Oregon-based entrepreneur.

Conversations fill the research for this exhibition. In one of these, John relayed his disappointment with a recent purchase of a mezzaluna. The handles were uncomfortable, it was poorly made, and in sum, it did not do its intended job. John took it upon himself to reimagine it and make it better. The excitement around the process of prototyping, finding better materials, making a better tool, and bringing artistry to something pedestrian was obviously intoxicating for John. My ongoing conversations with John casually yet repeatedly reveal his process – how he listens and observes every thing and every day.

His ideas for redesigning the mezzaluna led me back to the Museum's archive, reminding me that he took the same approach with the VAUGHAN STREET SERVING TROLLEY he'd made in 1979. Commissioned by the owner of an elegant Portland restaurant, the trolley needed to satisfy a number of requirements: it had to be a specific height, include a silverware drawer, have a shelf for French pastries, navigate easily in tight quarters, be expandable, etc. Instead of viewing these specifications as restrictions, John saw the opportunity to make a beautiful, functional, and innovatively designed object. In addition, the wheels were designed to accommodate a number of surfaces, using a forgiving and resilient material, leather. The trolley became one of his most popular designs, and an object worthy of preservation and care to be shared with future generations through its inclusion in the permanent collection of Museum of Contemporary Craft.

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John Economaki’s work was shown at Museum of Contemporary Craft numerous times during his years of furniture making. Economaki also served on the Board of Directors from 1980-1984, helping to shape the focus and standards for the organization as the American Craft Movement and new approaches to furniture surfaced in the 1970s.

When Museum of Contemporary Craft re-opened at its current location in 2007 and featured the exhibition *Craft in America*, the VAUGHAN STREET SERVING TROLLEY was added to our local iteration of the exhibition. In preparation, some restoration work needed to be done to the wheels. We contacted John to perform this work. I was fascinated to meet him, having recently worked for another institution that collected stagecoaches. The similarity in construction between the wheel on the trolley and that on a stagecoach struck me as remarkable. Both make use of wood construction, but with an added material on the exterior of the wheel – iron in the case of a coach, leather for the trolley – to bolster longevity, the ability to navigate rough terrain, and keep both passengers and pastries safe. Watching John repair the wheels, his deep love of materials and process were visible and inspiring.

And again, the same approach of merging functionality with aesthetics can be seen with the object that started his transition from furniture maker to tool maker in 1983: the TS-2 8” MASTER TRY SQUARE, which began in Rosewood and brass and its latest iteration in the TS-2V2 TRY SQUARE, made of machined stainless steel or anodized aluminum. The materials may have changed, but his approach to the object has not. You can see that same philosophy and responsiveness first-hand in tool making—and how John is willing to shift, change, and try new materials if they create a better functioning object.

These three objects show a through-line of creativity and how John chooses to make, whether it is a simple kitchen implement like a commercially made mezzaluna, a piece of his own furniture, or a Bridge City tool. All three utilize his methodology of creative practice, an idea you will see running through the exhibition, which will include his furniture, sketches, videos of his tools in action, and more. Moving beyond just the objects and texts, we aim to create an exhibition that exemplifies his approach to life. If not a maker of tools, John Economaki would still work in this same way – of this I am confident.

This approach relies heavily on that of process – it is central to how John works. The process of making each piece better is ongoing, and making use of new materials and ways of making drives his own work and practice.

Designing the foxtail plane began with an idea of how to make the handle feel better in the hand. A sketch on a napkin was then transferred to Photoshop to be manipulated, elongated, pushed, and pulled. This file makes its way to a Wacom interactive drawing tablet where it is manipulated even more. On to a 3-D printer where a prototype is produced. It is then held, tested, evaluated, and pronounced ready – or not yet ready for production. While the foxtail plane appeared to be perfect on the screen and in process, the model felt awkward in the hand, hit in the wrong places, and proved uncomfortable to use. Back to design – working until it is just right.

The design process is only one part of the fine balance of owning and running a business. As John explains in this publication, and we present in the exhibition, to make this kind of work succeed requires knowing when to be the artist/designer/craftsman and when to switch to the spreadsheet/human resources/business person. Strengthening the other hemisphere of the brain and being agile enough to toggle from one to the other is key to keeping a creative business alive. At any given time, you may encounter John the toolmaker, the furniture designer, the CEO of a business, client, or blogger. Each is a different manifestation of John. It is this complexity which makes John a fascinating subject for a Museum exhibition, and prompted our desire to connect broader communities with John through this project.

One hallmark of being a smart business owner is knowing when to embrace new technologies, better ways of working, and change. John has done this throughout his career and is keen to try new things which make his design projects more efficient and productive. Bridge City Tool Works was one of the first companies to use digital technology, CAD design – more commonly used by architects – Photoshop and interactive tablets to speed the process and produce better products. 3-D printers provide John with a prototype in short order so design changes can be made quickly and effectively.

John not only experiments with new technologies, but he is also clear on the limits of his own expertise – and when he needs to bring others into his work to achieve new levels of success. This is how his relationship with Joe Felzman developed; John knew instinctively that the images of his furniture had to embody the same artistry, design, and attention to detail as the objects themselves. Additionally, the image had to stand in for the physical object in jury submissions, catalogs, and advertisements. Showcasing how the collaboration exceeds what each could achieve individually is one of the goals of this exhibition.



CS-12v2
Combination Square
2010
John Economaki
Photo: Joe Felzman

The aesthetic strength of each tool and piece of furniture designed by John is undeniable. As I prepare the checklist for the exhibition, his chair, table, try square, and plane are, for me, timeless examples of truth and beauty in materials and design. They remain as relevant and fresh as when they first premiered. The aesthetic principle guiding John’s furniture work still directs his design work in creating tools, as seen in this quote from *American Craft* magazine, Aug/Sept 1982: “My intentions as a woodworker can be summed up in one word: simplicity... I don’t have a cerebral approach to my craft. It’s a rather time-consuming and painstaking process of identifying every ugly element in a piece. I either remove or modify it. What remains, I hope, is a simple form that maintains some structural and aesthetic dignity.” Regardless of whether his materials shift from Rosewood and brass to cast and colored aluminum, the guiding tenet remains steadfast. Pieces are skeletonized and stripped down to their very core, illustrating that John is not tied to particular materials or methods if they no longer serve the purpose of structural and aesthetic dignity. Listening, observing, and innate curiosity drive him to take advantage of new technology, ways of working, and opportunities for new combinations of materials to serve the tool and customer.

Quality is Contagious: John Economaki and Bridge City Tool Works is a retrospective offering the opportunity to connect you, the visitor, with the multi-faceted approach of John Economaki’s making, and to illustrate how his holistic creative practice permeates all aspects of his life. There is no separation between craft, design, and art with John Economaki. All intersect and overlap – all are crucial to his distinctive business and practice. When faced with a seemingly insurmountable challenge of changing your life’s focus overnight, we default to our foundational selves. For John Economaki, who went nearly overnight from artisanal furniture craftsman to designer of tools, his foundational core became the driving force. You may know him as a toolmaker, or a business owner, or an artist. We, at Museum of Contemporary Craft, want you to see and understand how he is all of these at the same time, and to inspire you through this exhibition to use your own foundational core to create lives that exemplify your own creative abilities.

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