



Mischief- Making: Contemporary Craftsman Jake Cress

**January 28, 2011
through June 19, 2011
William King Museum
Price-Strongwell Galleries
This exhibition is
sponsored by:**



**Highlands
Union Bank**

Those who describe themselves as furniture makers frequently subdivide into divergent categories based on their approaches, training, and priorities. Revivalists or traditionalists strive for continuity with the past, employing older manufacturing techniques and working in historicizing styles. They are often educated through apprenticeships, self-teaching, or specialized programs. Studio furniture makers venture toward ingenuity, creating new shapes and forms or experimenting with processes. They have most often been trained in collegiate programs or independently. Jake Cress straddles the proverbial gap between the two groups. A self-taught furniture maker from Fincastle, Virginia, Cress transforms traditional Chippendale style furniture into humorous, sculptural works, embracing his creative sensibility whilst vocally and visually rejecting the entitlement often associated with studio contemporaries and the purism commonly linked to revivalists. His ultimate objective though, to achieve and emphasize greater levels of technical prowess, is one shared with revivalists and studio furniture makers. Thus, Cress strikes a delicate balance among demonstrating his proficiency, revealing his imagination, and presenting postmodern commentary on his life and work.



Left: Crippled Table – walnut, 1992

Cover: Hickory Dickory Clock – walnut, 1997

Revivalist

Jake Cress learned the intricacies of furniture making directly from historic sources, visiting antique shops to expand his vocabulary in preceding modes. He began as a revivalist. Cress's traditional pieces reflect his hands-on approach and often reference authentic examples. Unlike his traditionalist contemporaries, whose measure of success is often a resulting piece's resemblance to the original, Cress adapts the elements of antique styles to suit his personal preferences or those of a client. Rarely does he replicate an original piece entirely in its exactitude. Imitating this style requires a high level of craftsmanship, particularly when working from sources originally made by highly trained artisans in very competitive environments. Cress's animated furniture succeeds in its execution and message because of his connoisseurship and mastery of the style that he parodies.

Cress favors American Rococo, more commonly known as Chippendale. Wealthy colonial Americans in the eighteenth century most often looked to London for new trends and fashions, and this style, no exception, spread to the colonies via English furniture and cabinetmakers. Its popularity was served only further by Thomas Chippendale's popular *Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*, which was published in multiple editions from 1754 to 1762. Chippendale, an accomplished craftsman, illustrated English translations of the popular French Rococo designs, Chinese and Gothic also influential. Rococo derives its name from *rocaille*, a term that translates to rock or grotto work in French and is frequently used to describe the abstracted floral, vegetal, and shell-like motifs seen on the furniture of this style and period. This massive, solid wood furniture was typically produced in urban centers in America such as Charleston, Boston, and especially Philadelphia. Besides scrolling vegetal and floral ornamentation, common characteristics of mid to late-eighteenth century American Chippendale furniture include cabriole legs, ball and claw feet, bracket feet on case furniture, pierced splats on chairs, and classical ornament such as fluting and columns. The Chinese iterations of the Chippendale style are simpler, often with long, straight legs known as Marlborough legs and varying amounts of fretwork.

A pier table, derived from a mid-eighteenth century Philadelphia pier table, accentuates Cress's dexterity through his reinterpretation of the source. The original table includes a marble top and cabriole legs terminating in ball and claw feet. The skirt features an applied shell and vegetal carving on the front and gadrooning around the base on three sides. Cress omitted the marble top and gadrooning in his table, added acanthus leaves to the cabriole legs, and exchanged trifold feet for the ball and claw. He notably reproduced the Philadelphia table's carved ornament on the front of the skirt, completing it with a lightly colored finish. The original table is firmly grounded, its substantial feet and thick top giving the impression of solidity. The carving on the skirt is beautiful, but an accent. In Cress's version, one's eye is immediately drawn to this feature, largely because of its lighter finish, but his rendering of the other components accommodates this effect. The lack of gadrooning eliminates the possibility of it distracting from the ornament, but the addition of similarly vegetal acanthus leaves on the knees underscores it. Delicate legs and small feet reverse the massing of the original, placing further emphasis on the central skirt and ornamentation, and therefore simultaneously on Cress's carving abilities.

Symphony Number 2 presents another example of Cress's tendency to translate an original design into a showcase for his talent at carving. The Nicholas Brown tea table, attributed to John Goddard, circa 1760, from Newport, Rhode Island, served as its basis. The Nicholas Brown table features a scalloped top with corresponding serpentine skirt, cabriole legs with carved acanthus leaves and shells on the knees, and "Newport feet," carefully carved ball and claw feet with thin talons, no webbing in between talons, and spaces between the ball and the claws. Cress's table repeats the majority of the Rhode Island table's components but with significant modifications. Cress shortened and subdued the carving at the knees and carved the ball and claw feet in a more typical manner. He replaced the molding seen around the original table's perimeter with a series of carved flowers within a reeded border. The key element of the Nicholas Brown table for Cress is the skirt. The carved flowers on the edge of the top again exhibit the maker's carving ability in an area in close proximity to the skirt, and the reduced size of the ball and claw feet avoid distracting the viewer from the intended area of focus. The maker of the Nicholas Brown table, on the other hand, used extensive carving on the knees to draw the viewer's eye downward toward the large, skillfully rendered ball and claw feet.



Right: Aladdin's Mouse – mahogany, 1998

Clearly, Cress embraces challenge and continually undertakes projects that suit his abilities and improve upon them. His half-size traditional pieces or miniatures not only demonstrate Cress's consistent search for new outlets but also a desire to emerge from an overcrowded group of craftsman. With half-size furniture, the difficulty lies in executing details of the same quality in a markedly reduced scale. Cress typically simplifies the amount of ornamentation on these pieces, exchanging classical motifs such as columns and dentils for the usual floral and vegetal characteristics. A miniature tall case clock, for example, does not feature the diamond-pierced strapwork or highly ornate finials and cartouche of its counterpart. The half size version is not devoid of decoration, however. Cress carved reeded Doric quarter columns in the trunk and base and topped the scrolling pediment on the bonnet with curling leaves. This small detail on the miniature clock also foretells of the next phase in Cress's evolution as furniture maker, his animated work, with its resemblance to a pair of eyebrows. The miniatures provided him with an alternative work surface and a shift in obstacles, but they did not quite suffice as a channel for originality.

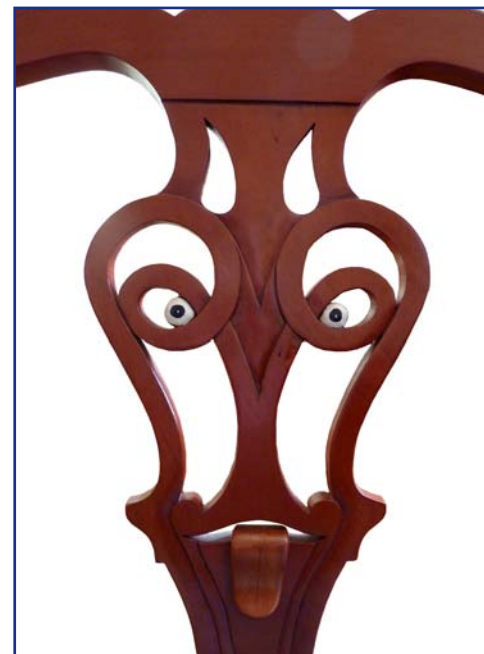
Humorist

The story of Jake Cress's animated furniture commences with a visit to a gallery in Washington, D.C. in the early 1980s, when Cress viewed works by several studio artist Wendell Castle, including *Table with Gloves and Keys*. One of Castle's "illusions," the piece consists of a demi-lune table on which rests a key with leather fob and a pair of leather gloves. The key and gloves, though, are actually carved wood, creating a *trompe l'oeil* effect. Admiring the maker's technical virtuosity and ingenuity, Cress inquired about the price of the piece. Cress was dismayed at the answer, feeling that he could make his own creative pieces at a more affordable price point for a deserving, yet less wealthy, clientele. He was annoyed at the presumption of a fellow furniture maker calling himself an "artist." Perhaps most importantly, Cress was searching for a new challenge at the time. When he returned to his workshop, *Crippled Table* was born (figure 1). *Crippled Table*, one of the least complicated animated works, comprises a rectangular table with plain apron and three turned legs with disc feet. The fourth turned leg neatly ends just below the apron, and, as if in its place, a crutch-shaped leg extends from below the table's edge to the floor. As seen on the ornament on Cress's pier table, the crutch has been finished with a lighter stain to draw greater attention.

Cress's initial forays into his animated furniture are clearly driven by this encounter with a Wendell Castle piece and belong to a category of studio furniture created in the late 1970s and early 1980s whose makers combined *trompe l'oeil* and wit or social commentary in an effort to demonstrate high levels of technical skill in a more innovative way. Other examples include Robert Bourdon's *Texas Taste*, a Queen Anne style chair with a carved cowboy hat resting on its seat, and John McNaughton's *Breakfast Table*, an entire breakfast setting carved as if just placed on the small table it accompanies. However, Cress rejects the notion of furniture maker as artist outright while the named makers embrace it, therefore, his work should be noted as reactionary against this group of makers. *Crippled Table* does not contain the complexity of *Table with Gloves and Keys* or *Breakfast Table*, but the intent is less a demonstration of technical prowess than an

exercise in absurdity: the table has a broken leg, and, instead of repairing it as a piece of furniture, it has been provided with a crutch, like a person.

Cress's oeuvre includes several of these animated or illusionistic works that provide imaginative, amusing commentary about both his craft and daily life while simultaneously proving his capability. For *Peel Here*, Cress has carved an undulating piece of wood on the top of the Chinese Chippendale end table to appear as if it is peeling back from the front right corner, a simulacra of a peeling, veneered surface. This corner of the table consists of a carved checkerboard of lightly and darkly stained woods. The table exists as a sardonic statement on quality, with rich woods imitating the action of less expensive veneer, as well as a testament to Cress's forte. *How to Build Furniture* conveys a similar tone of sarcasm. Another small end table, three of the piece's cabriole legs stand at the correct length, but one must have a "book" placed at the base of its foot to match the height of the others. The carved wooden book's cover plainly reads *How to Build Furniture*, suggesting that the maker has followed a guidebook to furniture-making and in the end found the book more useful in correcting the error it inevitably led him to make. It is a masterfully executed piece that has been carved to look like a mistake. Humor can be found in this demonstration of humanity, but the piece also presents biting criticism of such books and their authors.



Above: *Sassy – cherry*, 1994

While all of this "funny furniture" has been classified into Cress's animated furniture, the *trompe l'oeil* pieces belong to a group of items that are not truly animated, and another subcategory within this work contains pieces that have elements of animation, but do not take on living qualities. *Aladdin's Mouse* exemplifies the latter. The table appears, at a distance, to be another of Cress's traditional tables. The rectangular table has molding just below its edge, gadrooning around the base of the skirt, and four cabriole legs with acanthus carving on the knees and ball and claw feet. A carved lamp with scrolling handles, in the style of eighteenth-century English designer Robert Adam, is applied to both long sides of the table.

Upon closer inspection, though, one sees that something is not quite right about one of the lamps. A small, gray mouse pokes its head out of one of the lamps with a slightly worried expression on its face, as if it will be caught. The effect brings to mind a Saturday morning cartoon, in which Tom and Jerry or other characters engaged in a chase conceal themselves in impossible objects or participate in ludicrous activities. Cress certainly seems to engage a narrative when creating these pieces, only revealing one frame of the story occurring in his mind. With Aladdin's Mouse, Cress has combined his aptitude for carving with his ingenuity and sense of humor. The mouse's companion does not fare so well in Rat-Leg Table. Fairly simple in its decoration, the small rectangular table has a plain top and skirt and tapered block legs. A swooping, slightly curved brace connects the front two legs. A wooden sword with cross-shaped hilt slices through the tabletop and pierces a small, carved mouse to the back left leg. Again, one can picture the table as a single moment from a larger plot: someone, perhaps a roguish gentleman with a bit too much ale in his system, has spied the mouse that has plagued his home for months, and solves this problem in the swiftest method possible. The piece's amusement stems not only from the quirky aspects of the piece of furniture, with a rat carved on one leg and a sword through the center, but also from the display of a drastic solution to a rather small problem. We are asked to see the humor in our tempers.

The final category of Cress's animated furniture includes examples that are anthropomorphized. Hickory Dickory Clock provides one of the few examples of this level of animation in case furniture. Based on the familiar nursery rhyme, a tall case clock engages in battle with two annoying mice. The clock is carved in a historic style, as Cress prefers, with a bonnet with large, molded crown and turned urn-shaped finials, full-turned Doric columns flanking the dial, fairly plain trunk, and bracket feet. The clock's hands are pointed at one, and the dial has been painted as a frustrated human face. The door in the trunk stands open, with the pendulum swinging out of it to strike at a mouse running up the clock's side. The base of the clock twists toward the front right corner, with one bracket foot stretching forward in an attempt to stomp a second, fleeing mouse. This concept, with a clock with an angry expression on its "face" and a mouse running down the clock's side, has been used before to illustrate this nursery rhyme. Cress, however, brings the two-dimensional illustration into a three-dimensional scene on a human scale. This concept, with a clock with an angry expression on its "face" and

a mouse running down the clock's side, has been used before to illustrate this nursery rhyme. Cress, however, brings the two-dimensional illustration into a three-dimensional scene on a human scale. He also twists the meaning of the rhyme with his rendition. There are two mice, so when "the clock strikes one," not only does the clock strike one o'clock, but the clock also strikes one mouse and the other "runs down."

Cress's animated Chippendale chairs, by far, best exhibit his ability to give furniture life. Chairs present an easier subject to humanize, as their associative terminology largely comes from anatomy: arms, legs, knees, feet, and even, on Chippendale chairs, ears. Cress often states that he is simply bringing an old idea to fruition. The cabinetmaker uses the trademarks of the Chippendale style to further animate his chairs, with straps on pierced splats forming faces and scrolled arms hands. Pairing his immense imagination with his technical skill, Cress ably shapes Chippendale chairs into sculptures with all-too-human qualities. Oops is most recognizable of Cress's pieces and is one of the most inventive and challenging. The Chippendale chair is fancifully carved, with a shell and rocaille on the crestrail, ribbon-like decoration on the front rail of the seat, and acanthus leaves at the knees. The strapwork of the splat scrolls inward, like question marks, in a shape similar to the "owl's eyes" seen on many eighteenth-century Massachusetts chairs. The chair, however, does not stand on four legs; instead, the front leg is extended outward toward the ball that is missing from its ball and claw foot. The back posts of the chair and stiles curve in atypical ways to portray a shift in balance. Even the eyes, painted and attached in the middle of the "owl's eyes," are fully concentrated on the effort. The chair's position is somewhat restrained, suggesting an attempt at discretion. It mimics one someone would take if he dropped something at a special event, carefully stretching out a foot to tap it back within arm's reach. Is the chair attempting to recover its ball before anyone else sees, though, or before a human sees?

The animated chairs seemingly form their own community and participate in activities normally reserved for people, as seen in Aisle Seat, a chair that apparently delights in the theater. Fanciful vegetal ornament and scrollwork adorns the crestrail and front rail of the chair's seat, with acanthus leaves on the knees. The strapwork scrolls inward to form the "owl's eye" shape with a pierced space below the strapwork forming the shape of a mouth. A bowtie is applied under the mouth.

The arms terminate in scrolls and the legs in ball and claw feet. This highly formal chair is rendered as if dressed to the nines, with the bowtie a more literal addition to the rather elaborate carved decoration. The theater ticket on the chair's right arm clarifies its related event. The chair's form, as an armchair, suggests a static position. With its arm supports underneath, one can almost imagine this chair settling in for a pleasurable evening of fine theater.

Self-Portrait presents Cress's depiction of himself as his best-known subject. The piece was inspired by a self-portrait by Al Hirschfeld in which the caricaturist portrayed himself as an inkwell, dipping a paintbrush into the top of his own head to begin another drawing. In Self-Portrait, an animated Chippendale armchair aims chisel and mallet at its right leg, which has not yet been completed. The chair exhibits many of the same qualities as Cress's other chairs, including the rocaille on the crestrail and acanthus leaves on the knee of the finished leg, as well as a strapwork face within the chair's splat. The arms, however, curve forward, their scrolled ends acting as hands with fingers with which to "hold" the maker's tools. This rendition of the arms epitomizes the experimentation with techniques and shapes that completing this type of work requires. Significantly, Cress's self-portrait participates in the activity in which he takes the most pride, carving details and embellishments.

Cress's chairs are amusing because they are unexpected, human in nature, and a bit absurd. It does not require too far a stretch of the imagination to think of a chair as a living being, especially given its shape, but one generally does not expect a chair to return your gaze, let alone stick out its tongue. The chairs exhibit qualities that are extremely human, both in facial expression and action. *Oops* intrigues because it displays a level of the emotion of embarrassment and then participates in a very subtle, very human activity. The chairs' appeal and humor also stems from their style. Wealthy Americans commissioned cabinetmakers to make Chippendale items in the latest fashion in the eighteenth century, and pieces in this style, particularly well executed, heavily carved examples, still carry these connotations of high style and wealth today. Original eighteenth-century Chippendale furniture's value has vastly grown, with the Nicholas Brown table on which *Symphony* was based selling for \$7.5 million in 2005. To see chairs participating in human activities is amusing, but to see such high style ones engaged in activities such as sticking out their tongues or smoking pipes heightens the hilarity. Cress opens a curtain onto Chippendale behaving badly.

In a further exploration of animation, Jake Cress collaborated with realist and trompe l'oeil painter Mark Young to create an installation entitled *The Decorator*. The work comprises a large painting of an unusual interior scene, a long Chinese Chippendale table, and a vase of flowers. In the painting, a set of Cress's animated Chippendale chairs sets about the task of decorating a room with live flowers. The foremost chair reaches out of the painting with a carved, scrolled arm to snatch a flower from the vase on the Chippendale table, breaking the dimensional plane. The second Chippendale chair looks on and a third chair leans through a doorway to observe his cohorts at work. The main room is depicted as an interior in the style of the eighteenth century, with cream paneled walls and a neoclassical fireplace. Large swaths of the walls are painted with immense landscapes of classical ruins in muted tones of gray, gold, brown, and green. A round tea table with tripod legs stands at the center of the painting, topped by a blue vase full of an abundant bouquet of flowers. Another such bouquet is placed on a chest of drawers in the room beyond, and a book open at the second chair's feet also has an



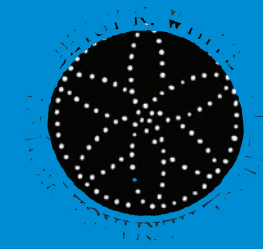
Left: *Oops #10 (of 10)* – mahogany, 2002

Above: *Age of Innocence* – cherry, 2001

image of a large blue vase full of flowers. A book on the tea table, titled *Decorating Made Easy* on the spine, presents a possible source of information in the chairs' pursuits. In addition to the bouquets, the chairs have apparently been at work decorating the room with colorful flowers, which are scattered about the room, some in unlikely places: dangling off the tea table, placed on the bookstand next to another book about flowers, arranged in a large bronze urn on the mantle, placed in the hands of the dancing statuary, precariously draped over a roundel in the room's molding, and formed into a chain of flowers around the bust's neck. The chairs have taken matters into their own hands, apparently displeased with their neoclassical surroundings.

In this scene, Cress's animated chairs, enlivened versions of a reputedly staid style, are in turn brightening a room full of somber tones and themes through the addition of colorful flowers. The chairs imbue the room with color and delight. Delight is a central theme within this entire work, both expressed by the chair characters and felt on the part of the viewer. The chairs take immense pleasure in their mischievous activity and in the process of adding color to a dull world. The viewer can be amused by the chairs' activity and its real impossibility, the game of seeking out all of the unusual locations of the flowers, and the trick of the carved arm reaching from the painting to pluck yet another flower from another blue vase. Cress professes to want to make people laugh, which his animated works often do. Young's painting, though, demonstrates Cress's works' ability to cheer in a very serious world, through the symbolism of his animated chairs bringing color to a sober environment.

Jake Cress is, first and foremost, a furniture maker. His works, traditional, miniature, and animated, primarily attest to his talents in his craft and secondarily expose his vast creative vision. Whether reproducing an intricate carving on an eighteenth-century pier table or forming a curving, sinuous arm on an animated Chippendale chair, the attention is consistently focused on execution, and Cress draws attention to his abilities through the final details of his work. Like his traditionalist contemporaries, Cress appreciates and admires the quality of his predecessors' work. However, he does not, as some revivalists do, see them as sacred, and he satirizes his favorite style's connotations of pretension. His postmodern sensibility and technical focus would seem to place him within the category of the studio furniture maker, but Cress refutes his association with this group and began his forays into animated furniture by rebelling against it. Cress and his work are therefore best described as individual.



Mischief Making is the 26rd exhibition to have resulted from the Betsy K. White Cultural Heritage Project, which was developed by WKM in 1994 to record the artistic legacy of Southwest Virginia and Northeast Tennessee. The project seeks to foster a full and accurate appreciation of the region's role in American decorative and folk arts, and more than 2000 examples of regional material culture have been documented through the project to date.

Each exhibition of the 2011 series is supported by the
United Company Exhibition Fund and
Marvin & Marcia Gilliam

Annual programming at William King Museum is supported through gifts and grants from the Virginia Commission for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, the Town of Abingdon and Washington County, other municipalities, the Southwest Virginia Public Education Consortium, businesses, foundations, civic clubs, and the generous contributions of our members and patrons.



WILLIAM KING MUSEUM

415 Academy Dr. • PO Box 2256

Abingdon, VA 24212-2256

276-628-5005 • www.WilliamKingMuseum.org

HOURS: 10-9 TUESDAY, 10-5 WEDNESDAY-FRIDAY, 1-5 SATURDAY-SUNDAY

Partner, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Member, American Association of Museums,
Virginia Association of Museums and Southeastern Museums Conference.

