

Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty
of the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in candidacy for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Personality in Furniture

by
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August 11, 1997

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MY THESIS EXPERIENCE

My first year at RIT was devoted to learning the basics of furniture making. Upon entering my thesis year, I realized that I had not had the time to explore all of my design options. In the end, I decided to extend my own studies one extra quarter based on the work I created and the struggle I encountered during my second year while trying to address my thesis.

When deciding upon a thesis direction that second year, I attempted to keep my proposal broad enough to allow for variety and flexibility while narrow enough to keep me focused. It takes some time to contemplate and understand what a thesis means. Is a thesis an exploration of a thought? Is the purpose of a thesis to prove an original idea? Does it imply a certain quantity of work? Is process and experimentation enough as long as an original idea is being examined? The answers to these questions would be discovered during my two year exploration.

With questions and advice in mind, I decided to investigate personality in furniture as a thesis topic. My intention was to translate the personality of individuals into pieces of furniture creating furniture with personality. I concluded that the many different methods of depicting and translating personalities, and the variety of different individuals to choose from allowed me the freedom that I wanted.

With my topic decided, I began to research what constitutes personality. The Random House dictionary defines personality as:

1. the visible aspects of one's character as it impresses others.
2. the sum total of the physical, mental, emotional, and social characteristics of an individual.
3. pleasing qualities in a person.¹

Although physical attributes are only a portion of the definition of personality, I felt that a strong and immediate visual connection would facilitate my initial research and design process. Jotting down names of public figures

¹ Stuart Flexner, Jess Stein, P.Y. Su, The Random House Dictionary (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), p.656.

along with physical characteristics that identified them provided me with enough ideas to begin sketching.

My initial sketches were based on glamorous, Hollywood actresses from the 1940's [Figure 1]. Although there were distinct qualities about this period of movie stardom, I did not have a specific person in mind. After working for two weeks in this direction and because I was working from a general type of person versus a specific personality, I concluded that these sketches exemplified an exploration of a time period more than personality exploration.

My focus on old Hollywood led me in the direction of designing furniture using modern day performers as references. The strongest designs came from a personality that is equally as strong and easily personified. The singer, actor and author, Madonna, has created a stage presence for herself that is almost incomparable in past or present. From her music, films and books, Madonna's personality is easily defined as physically and mentally strong, outspoken, brash, brazen, mysterious, talented, sexy, perverted, spirited, spiritual, committed to her beliefs, and controversial. Madonna is a media image—a creation of MTV (Music Television) videos and media hype. The public has seen her appearance transform over the years. Because of all these factors, a physical representation of Madonna's personality is fitting. So many visual interpretations came to mind that the piece began to design itself [Figure 2].

Madonna's stage presence is unique and bold. The raw sexuality within her performances has an intense combination of eroticism, guts and gaudiness that play off each other and create what we see as Madonna. With her long, pointy bras and suggestive body gestures in mind, I created the first piece—the vanity.

This excerpt, from an interview of Madonna by Norman Mailer in *Esquire*, captures the spirit of Madonna from which the vanity sketches were inspired.

Mailer: In one of your shows, you had these huge cones for breasts—

Madonna: The Blonde Ambition tour.

Mailer: And I saw them and I said, "Why?"

Madonna: ... There's something kind of medieval and

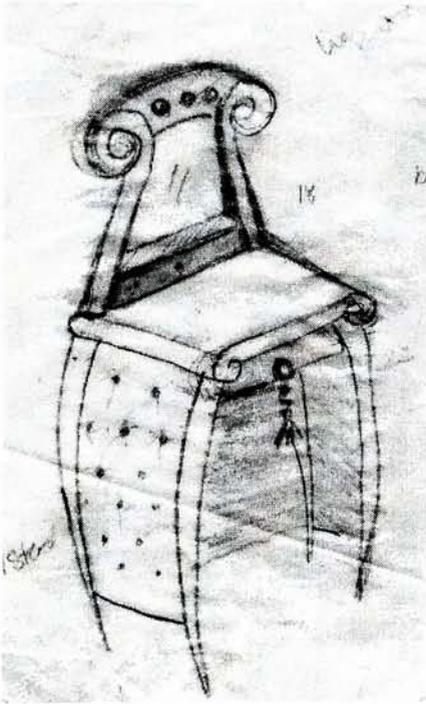
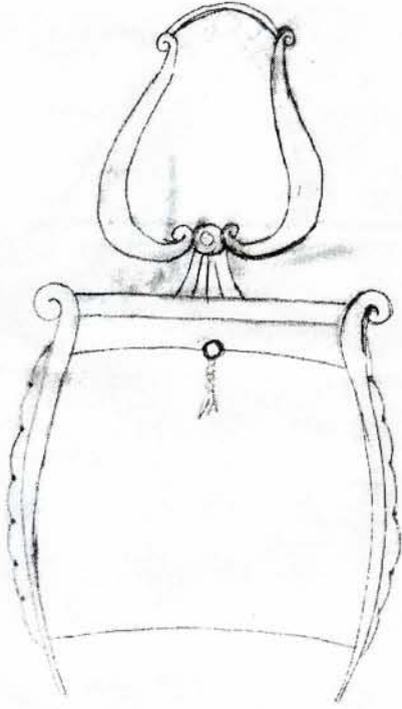


Figure 1

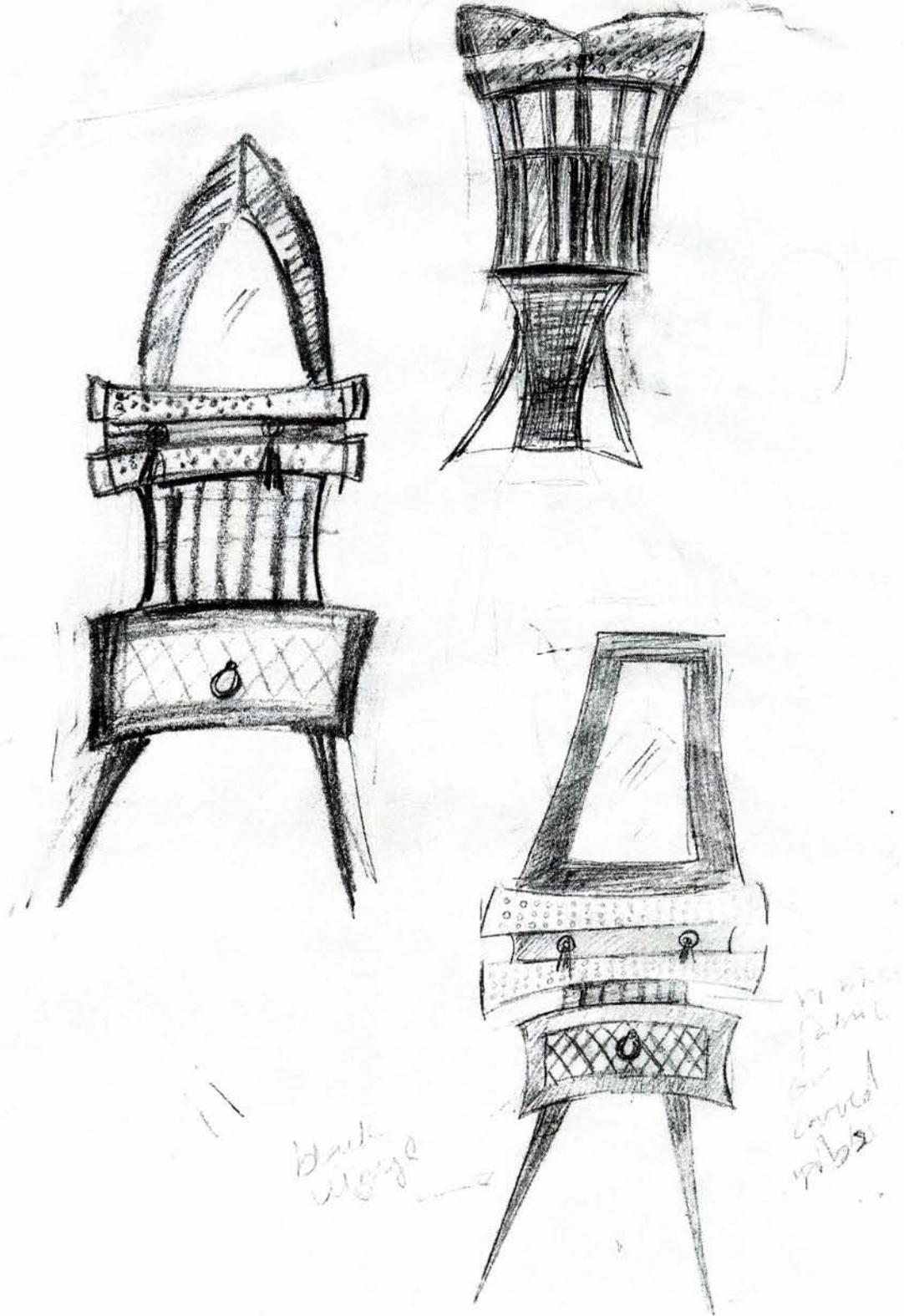


Figure 2

interesting about them...It's very camp. Women used to wear those cones on their heads, but now they've become like a bra...Also, they're pointed. So there's something slightly dangerous about them. If you bump into them, you'll cut yourself. Plus the idea that the men were wearing them, not the women...I reversed the whole Playboy Bunny thing, just how Playboy Bunnies in some costume that pushes their bodies into some unnatural shape, but now it's the men.²

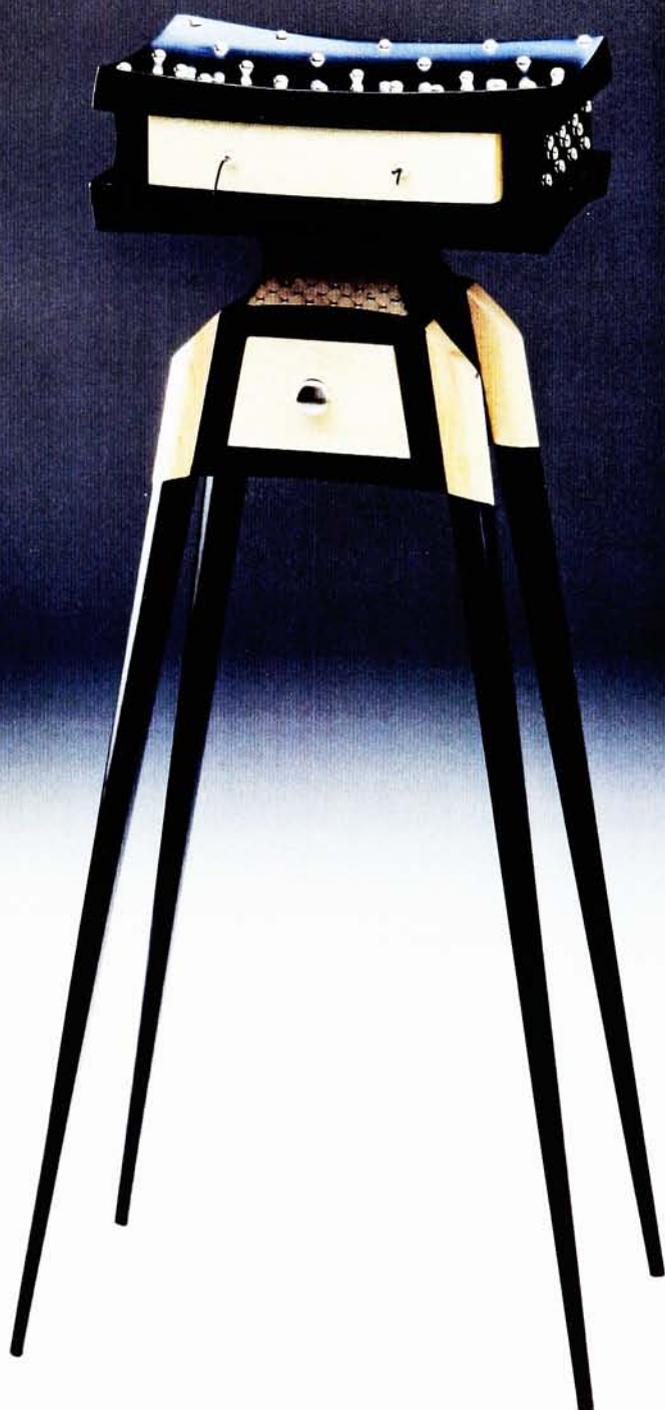
A vanity is a piece of furniture typically used as a place to “put on your face” and store cosmetics and toiletries. The word vanity is also defined as excessive pride in one's own appearance. I have taken the meaning both figuratively and literally in my design [Figure 3].

The vanity stands 41 inches tall, 10.5 inches deep, and 14.5 inches wide. The contours of the piece were created to relate to those of a woman. And likewise, the piece consists of four distinct shapes that imply body sections. The top section is horizontal and narrow with compound curves on its top and bottom surfaces. This section is the most prominent as it thrusts out further than those below. The carcass is sprayed with a high gloss, black lacquer to create the visual and tactile feeling of vinyl, and is covered with chrome studs—the combined elements creating a provocative image. The drawer is left natural maple, suggestive of bare skin. The drawer pulls are made from chrome beads and leather tassels, which conjure up the sensual imagery of an exotic dancer.

The top rests on a curvaceous waist of solid, natural maple covered in black lace; the skin tone of the wood is visible beneath the lace. This section recedes under the top section and creates a smooth transition into the next form.

The bottom section consists of a naked drawer framed in a black lacquer carcass. It has a rounded pyramid shape and a protruding drawer pull in the “bellybutton” region. Both drawer bottoms are lined in lace. The shape and placement of the bottom drawer was designed to play upon the literal definition and profane suggestion of the word “box”.

² Norman Mailer, “Like a Lady,” *Esquire*, August 1994, p. 49.



The four long, tapered legs attach to the box sides, creating hips. The maple legs maintain their natural color on top before dramatically transitioning to gloss, black lacquer—dressing them in thigh-high boots.

The combination of shapes and color create a figurative form that is standing strongly, with legs spread and hips and chest forward; striking a pose seen often in Madonna's videos.

The lacquered and studded surface treatment helps the forms create a sexual tension within the piece. Madonna's vanity strikes a pose, proud and determined and dressed to perform.

Having interpreted a figure of our present day culture, I decided to look into the past for my second piece's inspiration. I began the design process for the next piece in the same manner as the first—choosing a personality that evoked immediate visual imagery. Unlike Madonna, whose physical qualities were an obvious departure point, I chose Christopher Columbus because of the inherent mental and emotional qualities he possessed as an explorer.

The thoughts behind my sketches for the Christopher Columbus piece were of ships, water, courage, risk, adventure and exploration. Because Columbus' physical appearance has little to do with his notoriety, this piece did not dictate a figurative form. The sketches, therefore, were more conceptually connected to their inspirer and consisted of many different possible furniture forms [Figure 4].

While exploring possible bases for a desk design, I began to play with boat forms. I found manipulating reed a quick process that resulted in voluminous contours. By soaking the material in water and then twisting and tying the pieces together to hold the shapes, I was able to build billowing sail frameworks. These delicate, open, surging and gesturing forms became the focal point of the next piece [Figure 5].

The wall-mounted shelf represents Christopher Columbus' courageous push out into the unknown. The shelf cantilevers from the wall, suspended by a mass at one end. This landlike mass of tiers recedes into the wall—the top tier forming a

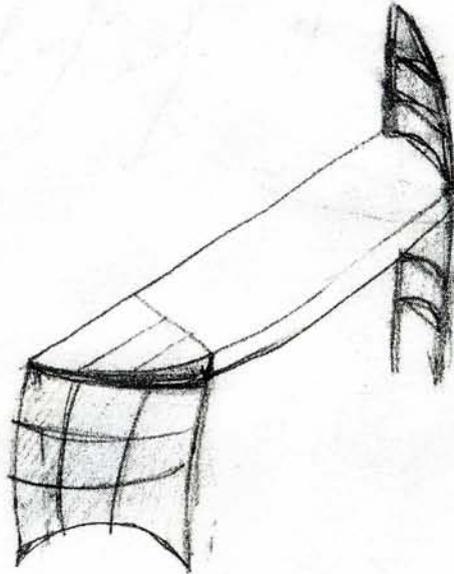
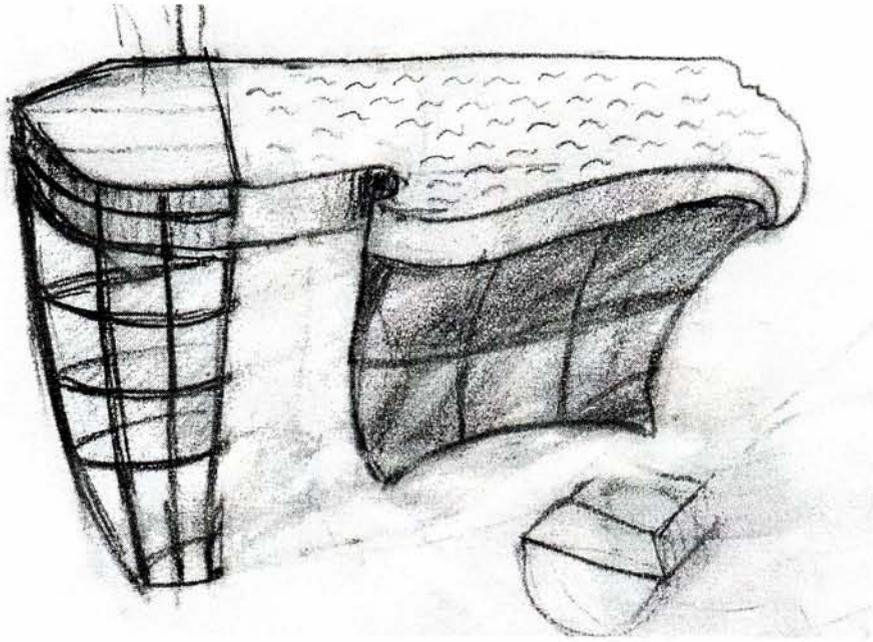
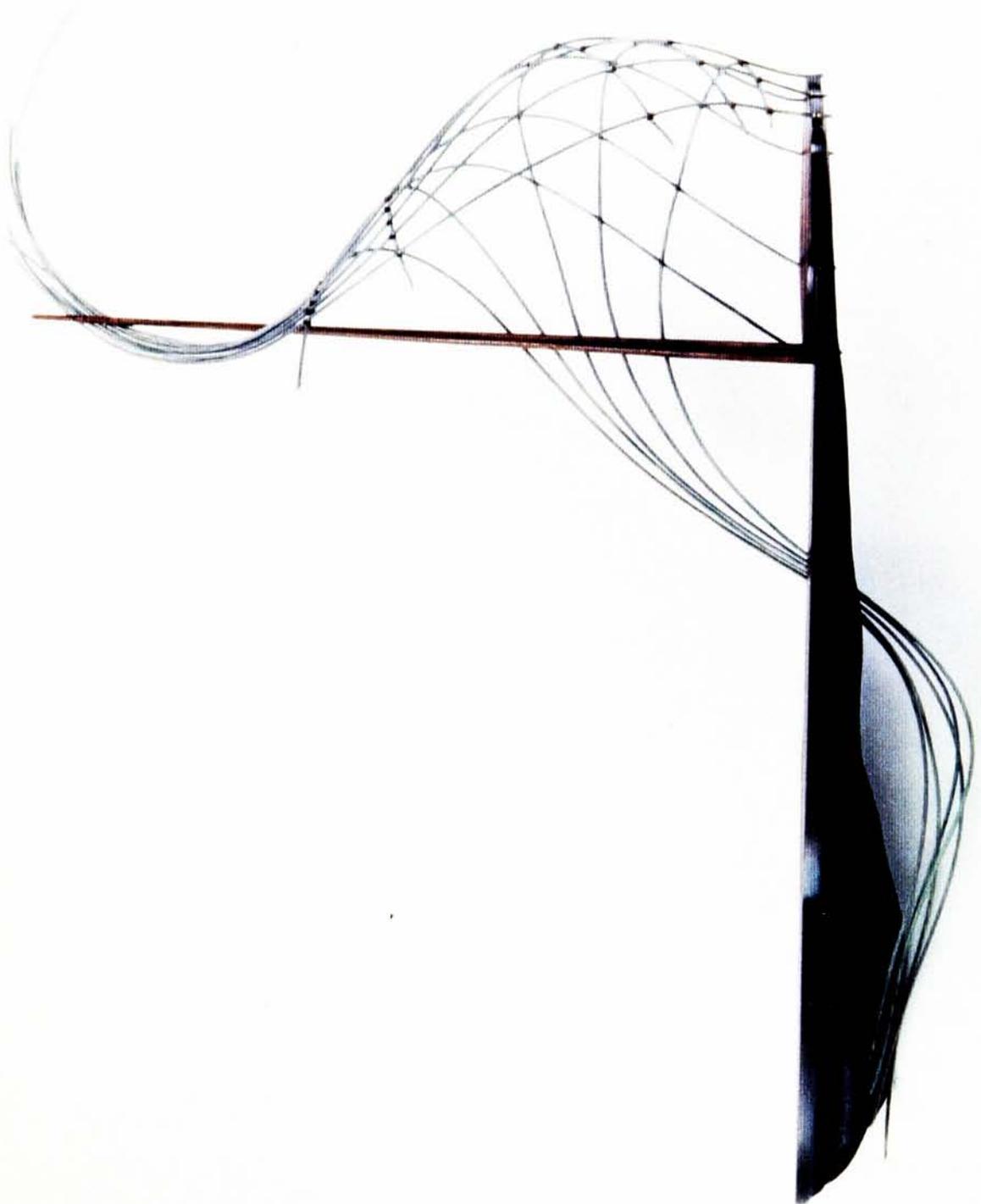


Figure 5



wave pushing away from its solid base. The wave terminates at the reed sail form which bulges with a gust of wind, forcing the ship into unexplored terrain.

The top tier and ship's mast maintain their natural mahogany color with an oil finish while the landlike mass and reed were dyed. The dark teal dye on the underside of the shelf provides a mysterious environment that reflects the ambiguous quality of the land and sea. The sail's weathered teal tones lighten the sail form and add contrast to the seaweed strands attached to the land mass. The ship is suspended on what is the false notion of the edge of the world. The shelf is both land and sea. The reeds connect to both—holding onto the past while forging into the future.

The carved tiers of the shelf inspired me to build another piece that would highlight carved surfaces. Changing my design process, I decided upon a specific type of furniture prior to defining the personality from whom it was inspired. In hindsight, this approach was the least successful. Although the piece itself contained plenty of character which is an aspect of personality, it was loosely connected to a person. The piece stepped further away from a physical exploration of personality and stretched the conceptual connection, possibly too far. I first began designing a screen, and later tried to find a personality to attach to the piece [Figure 6].

Wanting to push the idea of a screen far from the flat, rectangular panels of the norm, I began by designing organic and dimensional forms that interacted when the screen was folded. Using two flat panels, I carved shapes into the wood. By tapering some shapes, carving others deep into the wood and applying other shapes on top of the original wood surface, I was able to develop a patchwork of dimensions and textures. The cutout forms, patterns and textures, displaying wild colors, grew into a junglelike façade. The shapes took on lives of their own—stalks jutting up into the air, leaves swooping around other plant formations, intertwining with others, creating a tangle of organic material. Shapes synthesized into animals, connoting the feeling of walking through a jungle with mysterious eyes peaking out from behind thick and diverse flora.



The screen's multitude of forms were painted with oils and pastels. The painting reflects the character of the jungle; upbeat, rich, complex, full of vigor and movement.

Although I had in mind the famous Dr. Livingston—the explorer who was found in the jungle after being presumed lost—I did not research the man enough for any true sign of his personality to appear. And so, in the end, the piece was inspired by an atmosphere and environment. I believe that the piece failed at defining a personality because I chose the personality too far into the sketching phase. I was trying to approach the piece by picking the type of furniture form first, but the personality would have clarified that itself. Instead, by choosing the type of furniture piece at the beginning, I was lead astray from my objective.

Although the sail explored the mental and emotional side of Christopher Columbus' personality, the vanity more fully defined personality by depicting more closely the sum total of the physical, mental, emotional, and social characteristics of an individual. I realized that I needed more pieces and time to better understand my topic and decided to extend my studies.

I thought about my thesis direction over that following summer and in the end opted to narrow my research to one personality. I felt that my statement was too broad and allowed for too many variations. Choosing a number of different people who have distinctly different personalities creates many pieces that have distinctly different forms and personalities. If four different people created pieces that were based on one figure, there would still be four different pieces produced because the artists' own personalities become intertwined in the translation.

Personality of the artist can be seen in most original design. My intention was to make the personality *inspiring* the furniture more evident than the personality of the furnitremaker. By choosing a figure so unlike myself, I was able to accomplish this. In fact, when making the vanity, I remember feeling so

disassociated from the piece that it seemed as if I was not influencing it at all. The piece had a mind of its own; I was just helping it to come alive. And, for this reason, I went back to the personality of Madonna.

In order to better explore personality as it is defined in the dictionary, I came to the conclusion that choosing one person to translate into furniture would allow me many opportunities to make that translation, while placing more defined parameters on each new piece. One personality gave me more direction by limiting my focus.

It is possible that I was better able to conceptualize Madonna's personality because she is of my generation and her success is a combination of talent, image and stage presence. It is also possible that the media gives the public much more information about someone's personality today than in the past. In any case, the remaining pieces focus on the personality of one person, Madonna. It is with the performer and the existing piece inspired by her—the vanity—in mind that I dove into the remaining work that constitute my exploration into personality.

Producing a series of pieces based on Madonna created further facets in my thesis exploration. The personality of furniture influencing the creation of new designs has a long history. Therefore, to fully probe my thesis, I proposed creating a series of pieces that both related to each other as well as contained the underlying personality of the performer.

By creating an atmosphere that alludes to a dressing room—comprised of the vanity, a dressing screen, seating and lighting—my new thesis objective could be obtained.

The vanity (being the piece already in existence) influenced the design of the next two pieces. Choosing elements that best described both the personality of the vanity and the performer, I began sketching new forms and pieces. I felt that the surface treatment (black lacquer and studs) and the juxtaposition of curves and sharp elements on the vanity were components that transformed the piece graphically into Madonna.

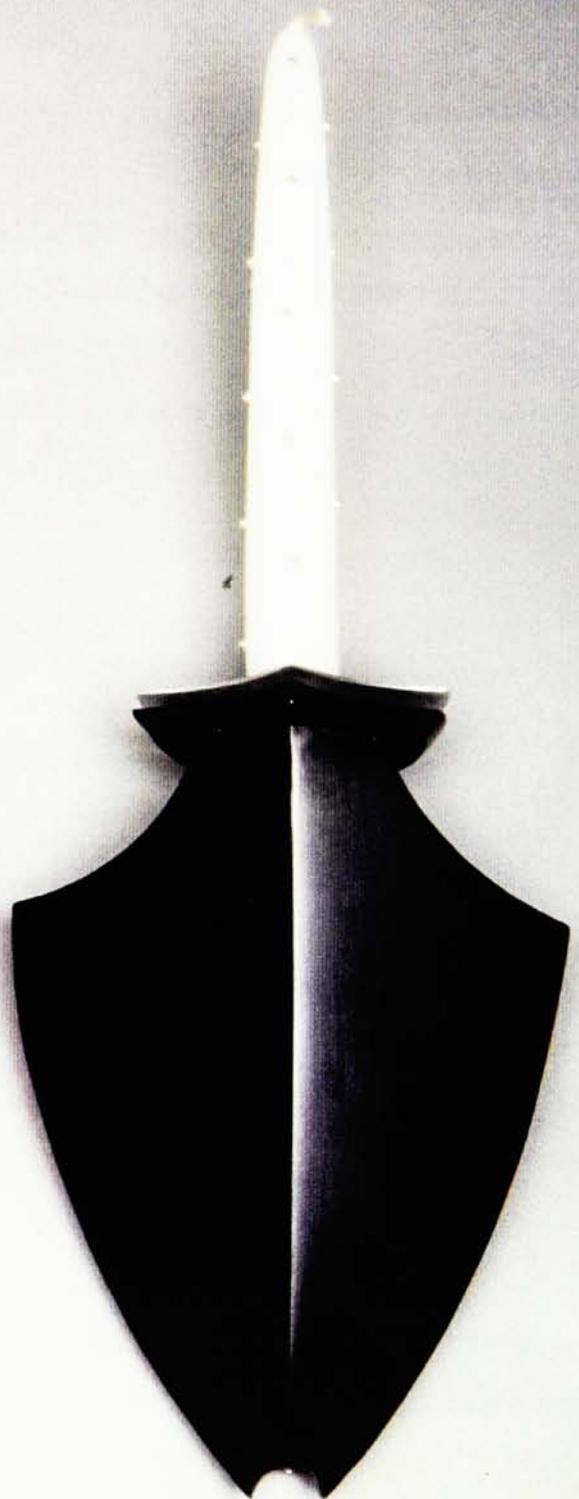
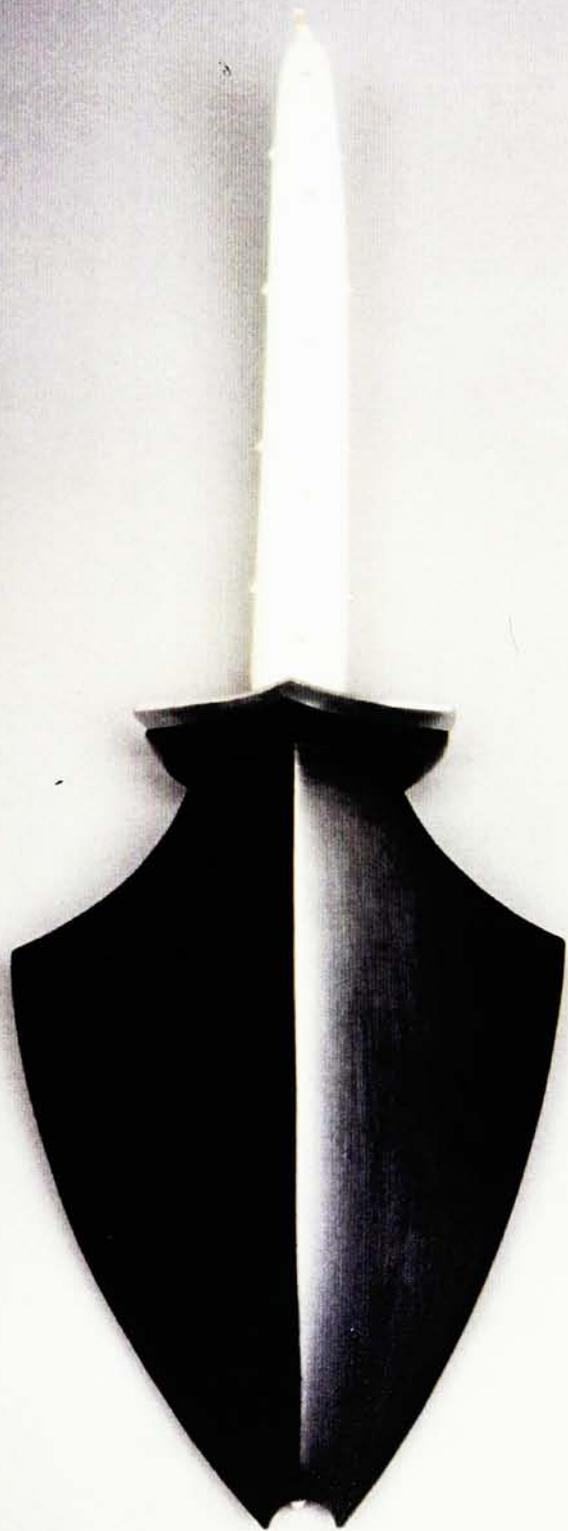
I also felt that capturing religious imagery and symbolism was essential in fully describing the performer, as she uses these dark and symbolic elements profusely in her work. I found visual religious references in Madonna's documentary *Truth or Dare* and took similar cues from her music video *Like a Prayer*. Through her performance, Madonna publicly challenges religion and politics. These outcries have bestowed upon her a scandalous reputation. These spiritual and political sides of Madonna were critical to my efforts to capture the sum total of her personality translation.

As I began conceptualizing the environment's lighting, I turned my research toward Gothic design in order to capture a religious tone [Figure 7]. The Christian Church controlled culture in the 12th century and its influence is seen in the architecture of the times. The imposing cathedrals are noted for their pointed arches, flying buttresses, ribs and vaults. It is with this imagery in mind that I began my sketching.

The two sconces share their joined pointed arch forms with the ecclesiastical architecture of Gothic times. This sharp curved form is used twice in the lighting. The shape of the top platform that holds the candle consists of two curves meeting at a center point. This point determines the center line on the body of the sconces which transition from the top piece into additional curves ending at what visually is a center point, but which actually has been cut into.

The dramatic flickering light that flanks the vanity helps to create qualities familiar with that of a church—mysterious, profound, ethereal. Unlike movie stars' mirrors, which are surrounded by round white bulbs whose glare hides nothing, the light in this room is designed to create an aura of mystique. The Madonna video, *Like a Prayer*, depicts this mysterious and serious atmosphere where objects and people appear as they really are and where evil confronts good.

The curvaceous shapes with sharp details and black lacquer also reflect back to the vanity, but the overall tone is of a liturgical ornament. The aluminum drip catcher refers back to the chrome on the previous pieces, and the



small studs on the candle continue this theme.

As the Dark Ages also define this period of time because of the upheavals that left Europe in chaos and darkness, so too does Madonna define the 20th century by creating acts of rebellion against the norms of today's society.

Madonna also uses religious ritual and dance to evoke in her audience an awareness of the primal urges within us all. With her dance movements and costumes, she unleashes the sexuality that society tries to tame. It is this combination of ritual and raw emotion that led me to design the stool [Figure 8].

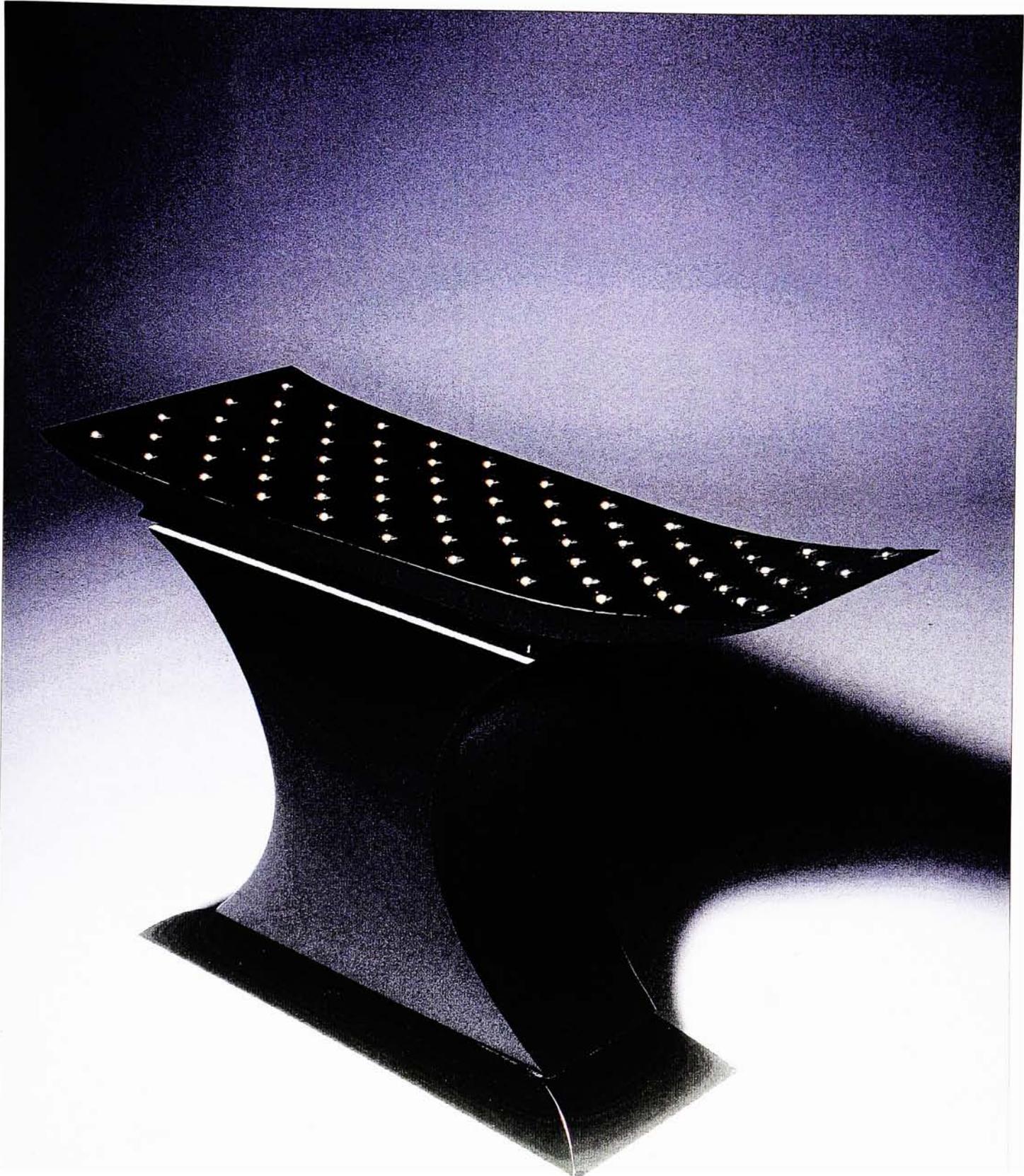
I decided to look into African design for additional inspiration because of the raw emotion and sensual, figurative forms that it shares with my subject. Both embrace the female form and use dance and decoration to connect and speak to the world.

In Africa, it would be a stool that is similarly associated with a specific individual, whose presence and place are maintained even if that person steps away from it for a period of time. Throughout the continent, stools carry great aesthetic, functional, and ceremonial importance. Not only is the stool an emblem of the maker's creative flair and owner's identity, it also plays an integral role in nearly all activities, from daily household duties to elaborate ceremonies honoring royalty... Stools communicate power, status, gender, moral values, and beliefs.³

Although traditional African stools are carved from a single piece of wood, mine was created in sections, joined together to appear as one piece. The stool was made as a solid form for the practical purpose of weight, as well as to contrast the open feeling of the vanity.

The elegant lines, organic and functional form and curved surfaces are common to traditional African stools. But in keeping in tune with Madonna's

³ Sharne Algotsson, Denys Davis, The Spirit of African Design (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 1996), p. 88-91.



personality and the qualities already seen in the vanity, the stool is covered in seductive black lacquer. The chrome pins are used on the seat surface for both decorative and functional purposes the delicate lacquer finish is protected by the raised surface. Brass pins are seen in many examples of African stools, primarily as decoration and to add distinction for their high-official owners.

The seat surface is curved for both functional convenience and aesthetic value, and its narrow profile dictates how one sits. It forces the sitter into a position of alert anticipation, as one cannot sit for long without a backrest to lean against.

The torso of the stool is carried over from the vanity. These curved forms create a feminine quality contrasting to the heavy base.

The base structure's simplicity and linear quality is reminiscent of more modern forms. It transitions gracefully into the lines of the torso. The combined use of modern line and sexy curves transports the piece from its African roots to Madonna's contemporary times.

The role of the stool in this setting is both decorative, emotional and ceremonial. This is not a stool for stepping. It is a stage prop. To understand, envision a woman wearing an elegant robe, resting on the stool to help her pull up silk stockings or waiting, with her legs crossed and a long cigarette in her hand, for a fan to meet her backstage after a performance. While the vanity piece assumes a pose, the stool is used to *set up* a pose.

Keeping within the boundaries now defined by the vanity, stool and sconces, the vanity's mirror works to visually connect the set [Figure 9]. The interaction between the pieces was made intentionally. The mirror's bottom edge picks up the curve of the vanity's top surface while the angles on its sides fit together like a puzzle with the angles of the sconces. The top shape of the mirror resembles a pouty upper lip and captures the coquettish spirit of Madonna. The mirror has a tapered shape similar to the sconces.

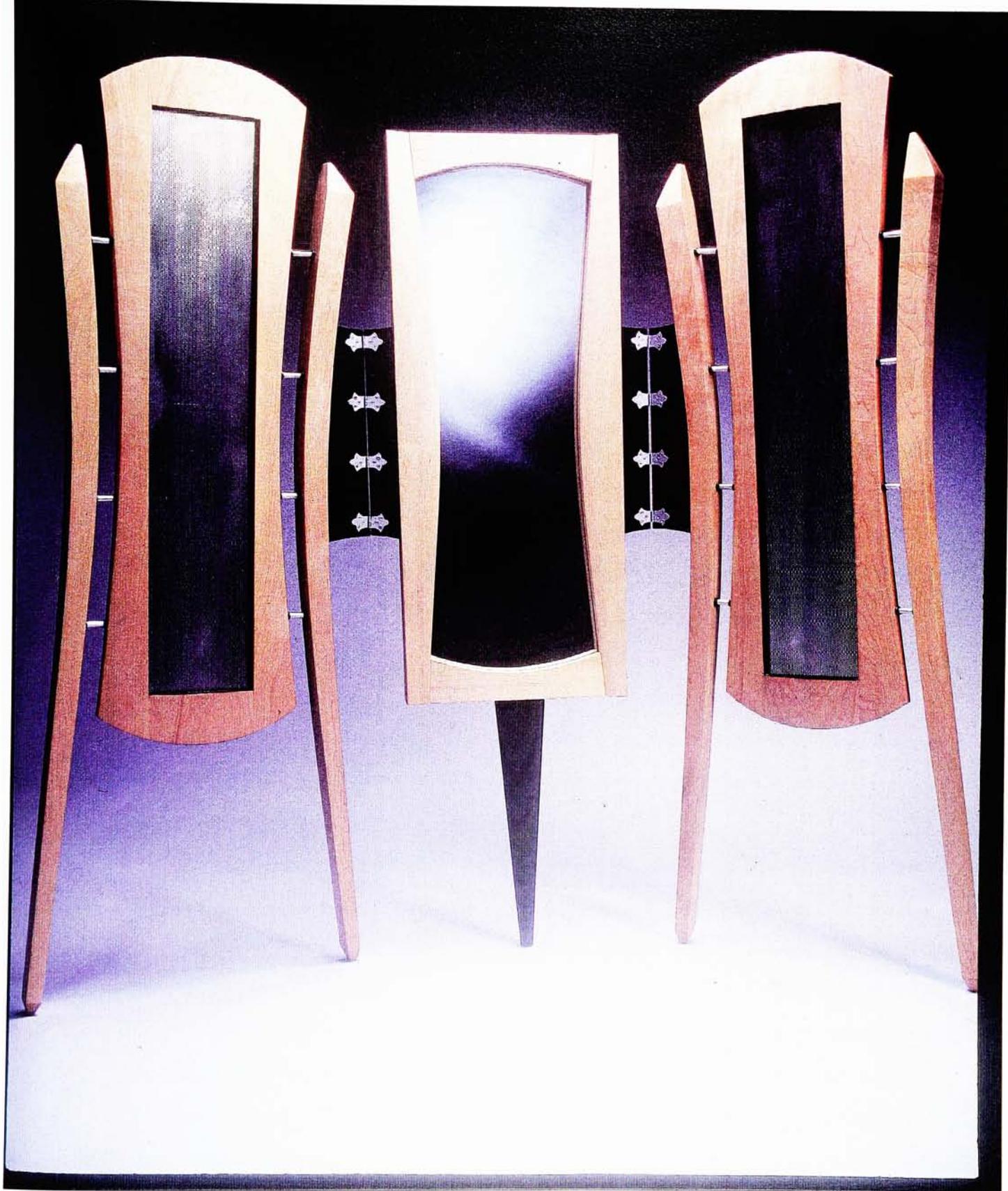


I had planned on keeping the mirror's inside edge exposed, natural maple, but as I began to carve and shape the mirror, a knot appeared. I was forced to lacquer that edge although the maple edge would have visually linked it closer to the vanity. As is, it connects more to the sconces—all black lacquer with similar shaping.

As a final piece, the design of the screen took its cue from the pieces which preceded it [Figure 10]. Having design guidelines already established, the screen is based largely on the mental and conceptual aspect of Madonna's personality. In her movie, her book and her performance, Madonna's costumes and acts taunt the public with questions of freedom of speech and sexuality. She struts her nearly naked body around to play devil's advocate against the norms of our society. What better way to play along with her peep show performance than to make a dressing screen that is transparent. By using perforated steel, the screen appears to be solid, yet becomes nearly invisible when set in the correct light. The vanity's forms were invoked once again to create a life-sized screen.

The mirrored section is surrounded by two curved panels. Feminine. Strong. Posed. The mirror appears to be supported by these two forms—moving arm-in-arm as if in a choreographed dance. These pieces have a more mechanical feel to them. Although the panel shapes are the same forms as on the vanity, they lose their soft, feminine appearance in the larger scale. The outside edges are curvaceous while the inside edges create a rigid rectangle. The center section, by contrast, turns these forms inside out. The mirror has a sharp, rectangular outside edge and curvaceous inner edge that is reflected in the glass.

Similarly, the color treatment mimics that of the vanity—light elements bordering darker elements. My intent was to put the spotlight on the vanity, which inspired all of the other pieces. I wanted to use less black lacquer on the screen, thinking that this would allow the vanity to stand out. Unfortunately, the opposite occurred. Once the entire collection was assembled together, because of its size and dominant natural maple color, the screen cried out for attention.



The purpose of creating the atmosphere of a dressing room was to confine the direction of the pieces, as well as to create a theatrical setting. With the furniture elements created, focus was then placed on the actual space. The size and shape of the room was decided upon during a thesis show meeting. This made advanced preparation most difficult [Figures 11 and 12].

I envisioned a dark, rich and intimate space. By covering the walls with a dark grey seamless paper combined with a red and black snake textured panel and studs, the environment complemented the pieces. The wall sections were divided by a two inch black line—faux wainscotting. The floor was covered with dark grey carpet cut into an s-curve. The choice of color helped to visually close in the space, while the dark walls provided adequate contrast for the pieces.

The grouping of all pieces together depicted a unified image. All of the pieces had a similar familiarity while maintaining distinct individual personalities of their own.

I regret my decision to use a third wall. I was originally going to place the screen in such a way that it would finish creating the space itself, but at the last minute used a third wall to enclose the space. This did not allow for light to penetrate through the screen and create the transparent look that I had intended, which weakened the surprise element of the design and the potential psychological reaction of the viewers.

The space was intended to appear theatrical and stagelike. I added a few props to aid this endeavor. A lace nightgown was suggestively hung from a sensuous, sharply curved hook, lacquered black. The nightgown was meant to add another element of lace into the scene as well as to conjure up seductive imagery.

Other stage props were planted in the setting. A tree, placed in one corner with an apple hanging from its branch, brought into the setting Madonna's religious overtones. The snakeskin texture also picked up the Adam and Eve temptation theme.

This thesis contemplates personality and its effects on furniture. Just as Madonna uses her medium of song as a method of expressing current cultural

ideals, my grouping of the pieces, with her influence, does the same.

...the object is not as much reality to understand, as a presence to perceive our sensory and corporal impressions...It is a compatible dialect between the concerns of the individual and the attraction to spectacle. It is a relationship to the tradition of craft, which is their legacy, and their relationship to current culture—media, difference, exploitation, and rising social consciousness—which is their present. This added narrative to the design communicates on multiple levels.⁴

⁴ Claire Downey, Neo Furniture (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1992), p.9.

CONCLUSION

My thesis journey consisted of many stops and turns that threatened to change its destination. Yet, upon reflecting on the experience, I realize that I was going through the very motions of exploration and discovery that a thesis entails. A thesis is indeed the process of examining a thought. The quantity of pieces made in order to do so is only determined by the questions and directions that the initial thought leads one to. I believe that the process and experimentations used to research and address one's thesis topic are vital to the *answers* for which one is looking. I began by questioning how personality is translated into furniture and by creating pieces that both did *and* did not successfully translate into an individual's personality was I able to comprehend the complexities of my initial idea.

Of the seven pieces, the vanity was the most successful at capturing personality. Answering the question of why this piece was successful was crucial to the success of the pieces to come. I did not fully realize this at the time. I now understand the depth of knowledge I needed about each individual in order to capture their personalities.

As mentioned earlier, the reason the vanity was successful has to do with the quantity of material around about the superstar. The public is aware of how performers dress, act, deal with problems, even where and how they live. I had movies, videos, articles, late night shows, books and lyrics to aid in my understanding of Madonna's personality.

I also believe the method I chose to interpret the star helped in the vanity's success. By using a figurative form, the vanity is immediately associated with a person. Madonna's personality revolves around her body and her actions—her physical appearance is very descriptive of who she is. Christopher Columbus's physical appearance says little about who he was while his actions, his mental and emotional characteristics define him more fully. Defining and translating performers of this century is a much easier task than looking at people from the past because of the available information. I could see looking at someone like

Arnold Schwarzenegger as inspiration for a piece using his massive, sculpted form and action figure movements as a starting point. I realize that I would also need to define his mental and emotional qualities and that is where this task becomes difficult to accomplish.

Upon reflection, I now see the definition of *personality* as perhaps being too broad. Exploring how an individual's personality translates into furniture is much different than exploring what it means for a piece of furniture to have personality. Exploring this distinction better can possibly be the focus of future work.

I have learned many valuable lessons about the value of in-depth research. I will never begin a piece until I fully understand my intentions—my goal. I will try not to change my direction so quickly. I would rather finish one track—one idea—before beginning the next in order to have a stronger reference point on which to base that next idea. I have garnered new insight and ideas from my work by writing and reflecting on it. I hope to carry all of these insights with me into my work outside of school. I thank my committee and my professors for sharing their knowledge, expertise and dreams and providing me the ability to fulfill my own.

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Music Videos

Like a Prayer

Material Girl

Documentary Film

Truth or Dare