

**Rochester Institute of Technology**

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Fine Arts.**

**The Relationship of Monumental Architecture, Nature and Humankind**

**by**

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**March 29, 2000**

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## **1. Introduction:**

**1. Original Thesis Statement: The purpose of the thesis is to create works inspired by the relationship between monumental architecture, nature, and humankind.**

**2. The basic premise of this thesis is that I could create pieces of furniture which express the spirit of monumental architecture and its relationship to nature and man.**

**3. Nature, monumental architecture, and humankind are the three elements that I combine in this project to reflect my visual, emotional, and intellectual experiences during my travels in Europe. My primary goal is to create works that include all three aspects and to attempt to understand the relationships between them. In my works I hope to clarify my understanding of how these three interrelate with each other. Each human being reacts to nature in a different way. Nature is so powerful that it dominates people, which means that people want to be part of nature when they establish their settlements and try to live harmony with it. It is fascinating how people decide to build in a certain location and are willing to do it in spite of tremendous difficulties.**

**On my travels through Europe I have seen many different kinds of scenery such as mountains, ruins, monuments, etc. After seeing remarkable scenery, I wanted to turn my experiences into intellectual concepts and then to turn them into furniture projects. When I looked at the landscape, it was music to my eyes. I wanted to express the effect of these images in my furniture so it would create a similar emotion. The memory of my travels has led me to craft the furniture pieces as a reminder of these experiences. My goals and objectives in this thesis are**

**to discover ways to make pieces of furniture that would reflect my reactions and inspirations I experienced during my travels in Europe.**

**These definitions will help to make my project clear.**

**"Humankind" means "mankind, the human race, human nature and human sympathies."<sup>1</sup> Humankind could be a man, woman, or the masses. Humans need shelter and protection from the forces of nature and from enemies such as wild animals, thieves, etc. This need results in many forms of architecture visible all around us. Our physical requirements are shelter from the elements and a place where we can socialize. Architecture not only provides for these needs but also expresses human creativity and spirit.**

**"Nature" means "the essential character of a particular thing, a species and that which is produced by natural forces, the system of all phenomenon in space and time; a creation; the universe."<sup>2</sup> There are several concepts of nature and it has been viewed differently through time (at least as far as we know from antiquity). My interpretation of nature refers to inanimate objects, such as mountains, landscapes, cliffs, etc.**

**"Monumental architecture" is a structure that has "a compulsive desire for grandeur and permanence of creation: grandeur and permanence of human creation through inhuman scale and material, permanence through balance, through theme; theme (beyond the everyday), extraordinary, transcendent, permanent in its universal**

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<sup>1</sup>Webster's, page 1212

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., page 1631.

appeal to the human condition."<sup>3</sup> Monumental architecture "has profound effects on human beings, their consciousness and ultimately on the world."<sup>4</sup> This gives people a feeling of unity, vitality, and hope. The romantic view is inspired by the beautification of nature in architecture. There's a harmony in the shapes of mountains and environment and architecture settled in the natural environment. This harmony is the essence of my understanding of the beauty of this type of architecture.

## II. Main Section:

### 1. How Travels Inspired the Project

A description of the scenery and architecture which inspired me will help explain how I decided to create these pieces of furniture.

The first scene I want to describe is the Gourdon Castle, located near Arles in Southern France. Before I approached this scene, I rode on a bus on a long journey and saw nothing particularly interesting until the point when we stopped to take an unexpected look. I could see the castle located on the top of the mountain a long distance away. From where I was standing, I was flabbergasted by the size of the mountain. It was gigantic. I began to understand that this castle, located on top of the mountain, was the culmination of enormous effort and a desire to build at this particular site. I was astonished by the scope of the project. It led me to realize the determined willpower needed to build on this site and to match the scale of the mountains. The site had sublime beauty for me as well as an exotic appeal.

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<sup>3</sup>Architecture and Meaning in the Athenian Acropolis, page 6.

<sup>4</sup>Webster's, page 1598.

The second theme in my work comes from two places -- Pompeii, the city in Italy ruined by a volcano, and Ephesus, the ancient city abandoned in Turkey. These cities created a lasting impression on me because of the magnitude of the ruins. I was transported back in time to imagine how they were built and get a sense of how much they had endured. The buildings appear to have highly developed craftsmanship, especially the classical Roman proportions which create a very elegant style. It is appealing and pleasing because of the simple, geometric proportions. These sites provided a powerful illustration of the beauty of antiquity. Additionally, I am astonished at how delicate these ruins are at the present time. They appear so fragile but also so enduring. They have survived battles with the forces of nature and human destruction for centuries. The ruins have outlived the craftsmen who created them centuries ago.

The third project was inspired by my experiences in Norway and the European Alps where the mountains created an enormous visual impact. "Human scale means a living scale, that is, how much space is required for one person to form or live; sets the scale of pattern or matrix of a man on the land. By "scale" we mean how one comprehends a structure, as well as how the size of the structure corresponds to one's own physical size."<sup>5</sup> My reaction to these scenes was so moving and vivid because of the large contrast between the massive mountain and the small size of humans and the work they create. I was awestruck by the massive size of the mountain compared to a small castle perched at the top. I want this comparison to be expressed in my furniture. In addition to comparative

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<sup>5</sup>People and Spaces, page 49.



size, I could see many different shapes and forms in the mountain that would be in harmony with the furniture I wanted to create.

Monumental architecture includes grand cathedrals, castles, or temples, that suggest a powerful correspondence to people's understanding of religion or their relationship to God or their kings. It is so powerful that it draws people toward it. I feel like I am participating in the time when these projects were built. They create new points of view, new visions, and new thoughts and understanding about myself that give me great satisfaction.

Where do people get their ideas to build these complicated structures with such a limited technology? How were they built on a difficult and complicated landscape? We live in a very technological society, which operates by computers and machines. We rely on technology every single day because it makes our lives much faster and easier. The point is that we sometimes forget to think about what it was like to live in the past with a very different and simple technology. It is inspiring to think about human beings spending their entire lives, energies, and effort to design and build such monumental structures on complicated foundations in difficult places.

Where do builders get the materials and how do they bring them to distant locations? They went to the woods to get the timber they needed and had it shipped on the rivers and oceans on barges and ships. It was transported on rough roads with carts that were pulled by animals or even people. Limestone had to be quarried to get the tons of stones and that could then be cut, chiseled, and hammered by the craftsmen. It was also shipped on rivers and oceans. It took a tremendous amount of time, danger, and risk to bring materials to a selected location like Pompeii and

**Gordon castle. People worked endlessly through hardship with simple tools and bare hands. Contrast this to contemporary building projects with sophisticated machines and materials.**

**The goal of building monumental architecture on a certain location mirrors the goals of the community. It brings people or culture together in a common purpose to glorify God or to honor a King. These projects sometimes took many, even hundreds of years to build. During construction, workers passed their skills along from generation to generation. These people continued to build through many different hardships as they suffered sicknesses, plagues, disputes, wars, and other difficulties. There were also deadly tolls during construction due to fires, disaster, falls, earthquakes, storms. They managed to rebuild again and continue on. When engineering was not adequate, projects had to be redesigned and rebuilt. People who experienced these ordeals had to be strong and patient, and they managed to finish their projects with a strength of spirit that I cannot comprehend. This encourages me to create the same visual impact in my work that I experience when I look at nature and the monumental architecture of history.**

## **2. Critical Discussion of the Body of Work**

### **Bench**

**Dimensions: 18" high; 19" deep; 69" long**

**Base - poplar; Seat - Mahogany**

**I came up with this concept because of the view of the Gourdon Castle standing alone on the top of the mountain near Arles, France. The medieval castle stands up high on the mountain with a vast blue sky**

lighting my eyes and bringing a big smile on my face. I wanted to share this feeling with other people, and create the impact of this vision into my work, hoping that people can see and feel of what I saw. The castle nestles into the mountain top and seems to be protected by the mountain from the rest of civilization. It gives the observer an eerie feeling, because the castle was so isolated on this location. The foundation of the castle was designed to be above civilization. It appears to be safe way up on the mountain top, away from the chaos of everyday life below. Kings and queens expected both safety and beauty in their lofty castle. When I first saw the castle from a long distance, this structure seemed to be rising from the top of the mountain. Looking at both nature and architecture together conveys the sense of freedom and power. Overall, I want to create a structure from wood which has a similar kind of impact and I hope to show the combination of peace, freedom, and power as poetic components.

The base of the bench is bulky and massive to represent the huge scale of nature. It also replicates the rugged shapes of rocks and mountains. The seat of the bench is a large geometric-shaped piece of mahogany wood. The completed project is an interpretation of what I saw, the smooth bench top set into the rough mountain-like wood base. The overall statement of the bench is solidity and the unity of forms in nature and architecture. The three dimensional form is so strong that you can see all kinds of details in every part of the bench while walking around it. The light will reflect and produce shadows and shapes just like it does in the mountains. The bench combines two different colors, dark green and dark red. I wanted to show both warm and cold feeling with these colors. Both are examples of natural color. One of the reasons I

choose this dark color value is because I could sense it when I walked into the castle's dark interior. It was as if the castle became part of the mountain. I have played with various pigments, experimenting on samples by using Japanese paint to match the color I am looking for. I mixed it with lacquer and sprayed it on several times to manipulate the shading until it was successful. The different shapes, rich colors and organic forms of the landscape are in harmony with each other.

### Mantel Clock

Dimensions: 17.5" wide; 4" deep; 34.5" high

Material: curly maple

It is a remarkable experience to see this kind of a classical Roman structure at Pompeii and Ephesus. The grandeur of these locations filled me with curiosity and inspiration because of many circumstances that no longer exist in our lives and because of the way the structures were built -- with outstanding skills and brilliant ideas, so graceful and full of artistic aesthetics. These structures have been eroding through the centuries because of natural disasters and wear and tear. These locations were so dynamic -- everyone who arrived there looked amazed and puzzled as they explored. The site helped us imagine what it looked like centuries ago. The clock in this project reminds us that time goes on while our lives exist for a short period. Architecture can outlast humans but it decays over time. The universe and time outlive all.

The basic structure of the mantel clock is three columns set on a base. Two of the columns support the lintel, and the third is broken off. I created the columns as a contemporary reminder of classical Roman architecture. The columns have shifted and appear to be crooked due to

natural disasters such as earthquakes and volcanoes. The shifted foundation, which is also cracked, shows the power of nature to destroy a human project. The cracked elements convey an impression of vulnerability and delicacy, and they give a sense of age and vulnerability -- of how fragile these columns are over time. The crooked pillars suggest natural disasters and erosions and I believe this may be one of the key successes in my project. If there were straight pillars, they would not provide the same definition and visual impact of ruins. Using the lathe to make the pillars was necessary to create the offset blocks needed to convey the passage of time. The base is slightly bigger than the top pediment which adds balance to the structure. Looking up from the base foundation to the smaller top pediment gives a feeling of monumentality so that people can feel their small size. The motifs at the top of the foundation, the sequence square shapes, demonstrate one characteristic of classical Roman architecture style which I believe is particularly beautiful. I chose to use curly maple wood for this project because I believe the wavy pattern resembles the patterns in marble.

### Cabinet

Dimensions 12" wide: 13" deep: 80" high

Material: moabi veneer and mahogany

My inspiration for the cabinet is similar to the bench -- that is, the magnitude of nature. But the cabinet illustrates a more abstract vision of massive nature. The cabinet is an example of how small humankind and architecture are compared to nature. It emphasizes the relationship between the monumentality of nature and the small size of human beings. The relationship is similar to a Chinese painting where the

mountains appear so gigantic and people and buildings appears small. According to Helen Gardner, "A characteristic painting in this style represents a vertical landscape of massive mountain rising from the distance. Human figures, reduced to minute proportions, are dwarfed by overwhelming forms in nature" (453). Once from where I was standing on the mountain top in the European Alps and again in the fjords of Norway, the views gave me a feeling of the mountain's overwhelming massive size. I looked down on buildings and people which seemed so tiny in the valley. I want to incorporate a similar feeling into this piece of furniture. The cabinet is tall like the mountains and nature. The doorway is tiny and dwarf-like in comparison to the massive cabinet.

The cabinet's tall body reminds us that nature is so massive. The cabinet has a strong sense of vertical rectangular shape which shows the striking size of nature. According to Mary Tregear, "This method has been called the "rising eye-leveled" a system of successive eye-levels which allowed an expression of depth in a tall format; it is the conventional perspective of Chinese painting" (320). The steps of the stairway appear to get smaller from the bottom of the cabinet towards the arch. The arch in this piece of furniture represents human scale as miniature in comparison with the cabinet's overall large size. The feeling of walking up the stairway and entering the arch into a massively sized mountain creates a powerful sense of human vulnerability. I used Moabi veneer on the cabinet because of its wavy patterns. I hope they will illustrate representations of landscapes on the mountain. For example, if you look at a tall mountain, you can see patterns in the landscape made by shapes and shadows of hills, trees, and valleys. I think the Moabi veneer looks similar to these scenes.

### **III. Conclusion**

**At the beginning of the whole process, I was focused mainly on one vision of the Gourdon Castle located on the mountain top and I was determined to transform that vision into furniture by building a bench that was bulky and massive in size. I achieved some success with these drawings but I was not satisfied because of the lack of architectural components in them. After making many different sketches, I realized that sketches are the key to the process because I could see the ideas clarified prior to building the furniture. I found some of the sketches really effective because I could see the image of the furniture take form as I went along. Some of the failed drawings helped me to explore new points of view that I had not thought of before.**

**For instance, I drew a series of candle sticks but they were not successful because I could not match the images to what I saw in Europe. I also drew full-sized drawings so that I could see the actual size of the furniture, which helped to create proper perspective. However, full-size drawings were limited because they do not have three dimensional perspective. The model was necessary to provide a clear three dimensional perspective . It gave me a better sense of the overall project because I could walk around the furniture. Finally, I felt the models helped me to understand what procedures I needed for designs, shapes, forms, and elements of the craftsmanship, and even the colors. I tried almost every possibility with the candle sticks by using sketches, full- size drawings, and models but I was not satisfied with this concept. I got to the point where I realized that I had to make a completely different design in order to create my vision.**

While I explored the memories that I had of Europe, I concentrated on my vision of Pompeii. I felt that the piece representing this city would have more architectural features and fewer nature components. The result of this thinking was my idea for a mantel clock. I wanted to show the sophistication of ancient craftsmanship in this piece. As a result, the architectural components of the mantel clock show complexity of design and attention to detail. It also achieves the delicate sense of aesthetics.

After I completed the bench and the clock, and compared them, I felt again that something was missing because the bench alone appeared to be more about nature and the mantel clock appeared to be more about architecture. I wanted the next project to combine features from architecture and nature. I drew more sketches to experiment with different styles, but these were too detailed. According to Edward Myes, "Less is more" meaning fewer characteristics could provide a better vision or outlook. I remember this concept from studying an architectural history course. Because I wanted to create an abstract vision that combined all three elements -- monumental architecture, nature and humankind -- I finally decided on the idea of the cabinet which conveys a sense of monumentality even though it contains fewer components of architecture and nature. The results suggest a sense of majesty and reminds us of the power of nature.

I believe that my work successfully expresses the emotional impact of what I first observed in Europe. The journey through the whole procedure has helped to clarify my understanding of the relationship between nature, monumental architecture, and humankind and of their relationship to each other.



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