

2013

# Calligraphy inspires furniture

Chen Li

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Li, Chen, "Calligraphy inspires furniture" (2013). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact [ritscholarworks@rit.edu](mailto:ritscholarworks@rit.edu).

**Rochester Institute of Technology**

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
School for American Crafts  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

Chief Advisor: Rich Tannen

Associate Advisor: Andy Buck

Associate Advisor: Zerbe Zordervick

Calligraphy Inspires Furniture

by Chen Li

May 15, 2013

## **Part I Abstract**

The seal script, a form of Chinese calligraphy used mostly on seals, inspires my thesis work. In both East and West, the seal is a personal signature for letter correspondence as a communication. Written communication is an excellent process in which there is an exchange and progression of thoughts and feelings towards a mutually accepted goal or direction. Through this source of inspiration, I will attempt to create a dialogue about cultural differences between my Chinese heritage and the new experiences in America. Sometimes, this relationship is easy and straightforward, but sometimes it creates conflicts.

For my Thesis body of work, I began with two subjects that intrigued me and were representative of the cultural challenges I have experienced. The first was the dynamic relationship between individuals and family. The second was different interpretations of the cross-cultural traditional saying: “rules are rules”. With these two subjects as a starting point, I created a number of furniture objects that were inspired from my source—the seal script. The seal script characters have been created as dynamic forms, full of curves and intriguing structures. In the body of work, I wanted to maintain a prevailing simple beauty and graceful quality. Characters were first broken down into parts, as I studied lines, profiles and forms that could be rearranged to translate two-dimensional graphics into three-dimensional forms. The resulting furniture needed to support human rituals and activities, and simultaneously develop a narrative that

would address Eastern and Western cultural similarities and differences. My design research and the furniture making process became the embedded procedure for my dialogue. The outcome would result in a body of work that could interact and engage with my audience, both physically and intellectually.

## Part II Discussion of Sources and Research

*Seal script (zhuànshū) is an ancient style of Chinese calligraphy. It evolved organically out of the Zhōu dynasty script, arising in the Warring State of Qin. The Qin variant of seal script became the standard and was adopted as the formal script for all of China in the Qin dynasty, and was still widely used for decorative engraving and seals (name chops, or signets) in the Han dynasty. Ever since, its predominant use has been in seals, hence the English name. The literal translation of its Chinese name 篆书 (zhuànshū) is decorative engraving script, because by the time this name was coined in the Han dynasty, its role had been reduced to decorative inscriptions rather than as the main script of the day.<sup>1</sup>*

*The origins of seal script (篆書, tensho) reach deep into the history of China; all the way to the end of Xia dynasty (夏朝, 2070 B.C. - 1600 B.C.) – the first historically verified Chinese dynasty. Seal script is a term that is used for both great seal script (大篆, daiten) and small seal script (小篆, shouten).<sup>2</sup>*

*Small seal script was, however, neither an invention of one man, nor was it developed immediately. Roots of alteration that eventually led to unifying the great seal script go back long before 221 B.C., to the northwestern territories of the Qin monarchy.<sup>3</sup>*

*Uniform stroke thickness and rounded edges are the basic rules of small seal and reisho (to a lesser extent) calligraphy scripts. The strokes should be consistent and preferably free of kasure (without white streaks within the line, caused by fast brush movement or deliberately excessive ink thickness). By rounding the line edges, the calligrapher loops the energy flow in a closed circuit and allows the spirit of his mind to live in the work forever.<sup>4</sup>*

I chose the seal script as my source of inspiration because it uses concise space to define infinite beauty. Many foreigners and most Chinese cannot interpret the seal letters but they can appreciate the beauty of the seal script calligraphic art, and appreciate the formal beauty. One example of this became the logo for the Beijing Olympic Games. The seal script used line and space to embody the athletic aesthetic. These lines, spaces and their positioning relationships deliver regular, decorative figures. These graphics differ in size, density, regularity and irregularity. The line changes its thickness, length, and softness in musical rhythm much like listening to beautiful music, or reading a poem. In addition, there are structural factors in the seal

script. The strokes that make up a character are arranged horizontally or vertically, tightly or loosely, symmetrically or asymmetrically. Through those features, the seal script incomparably embodies both a symbolic and abstract beauty.



Figure 1. The Sample of using the seal script character in design

*Refer to my work area—furniture. Studio Furniture is a subfield of Studio Craft centered on one-of-a-kind or limited production furniture objects designed and built by craftspeople. The work is made in a craftspeople's studio setting as opposed to being made in a high volume factory. This conception of the site of production as being studio links studio furniture to studio art and reflects its status as an individual creative process. Studio furniture objects often embody creative and/or communicative intent, a unique, design, and elements of functionality (either implicit or explicit), craftsmanship, and an intimate understanding of material in their creation. Studio furniture objects, perhaps because of their close association with sculpture and other fine art, are shown as often in art galleries as they are in furniture showroom. As is the case in the Studio Crafts at large, this contested identity is the impetus for frequent intra-field dialogue and differing intellectual positions on the matter.<sup>5</sup>*

In my opinion, the aesthetics of a piece of furniture can share the graphic beauty of

the seal script character. Furniture design and the seal script both use lines, shapes and spaces as graphic elements, and also take advantage of diverse structures and arrangements. Moreover, furniture reveals its beauty through three-dimensional spaces and various materials. As I studied the relationship between the seal script and furniture designs, I realized the common characteristics they shared, and it was possible for adapting those uniquely similar qualities to create my own style of furniture.

By utilizing the essence of the seal script character, I could add my ideas and aesthetic to their shape and structure to realize my designs, working in harmony with the standards of functional furniture.

## **Part III Critical Analysis**

### **1 Concept Statement**

My First idea comes from different perspectives about the relationship between individuals and family. As an international student in the United States, I have been suffering from being away from home. But what makes me more embarrassed is the fact that some Americans view me as lacking independence, particularly because I still rely on the financial support from my parents for tuition and living expenses. Given the distance from my home in China, I frequently feel frustrated that I cannot talk with my family routinely. Such experiences enrich the understanding of the relationships between an individual and their family. Both Chinese and Americans highly value family structure and the intimacy it brings to us. As a Chinese, I tend to be very tightly attached to the family relationships that I have. However, Americans present me with a different perspective, suggesting that I should be more independent, both financially and emotionally.

My second inspiration is a saying, "rules are rules". In both Eastern and Western cultures there is a common saying, "rules are rules", but the interpretations infer different ideas. Chinese understand this saying with Tao--everything runs with certain rules. People should follow the existing rules when doing things, contemplating subjects and interacting with the world. Such interpretation represents a respect for tradition, and also encourages for seeking balance and harmony between people and

the world. But in Western culture, the rules are often interpreted as something created to be broken or challenged. People cannot be held back by imposed rules or lose courage when seeking exploration and innovation. In order to pursue a better world, Westerners exhibit a strong desire to break the rules to explore and create.

## 2 Description of Work

### The first project-family



### Chosen Characters and Analysis

For my first piece of work, I chose the character family "家" as my primary source of design influence. At the same time, I wanted this furniture to express my understanding of the relationship between an individual and the family unit of that person. In my design, the structure of this character is divided into two parts. The upper part is an intersection of a straight line and a continuous curve line; the lower part is a complex combination of the curve and straight lines. From an aesthetic point of view, the upper part is more concise, and forms a symmetrical structure. For this reason I selected that part of the character as my design element.

My intentions were to design a tea table with a proper surface for holding objects. In addition, I wanted the top plane to be a suitable height so that people could sit down for a conversation together or one person could use the table when alone.

## Work Description

In my opinion, the relationship between an individual and their family is that the family unit is made up of individuals each having a set of expectations and responsibilities that strongly impacts the other individuals in the family. In China, the typical structure of a family includes a father, a mother, a son or a daughter; three individuals form this combined unit. However, in Western cultures I have observe that essentially all family members are individuals and that there are strong connections in each other in the family, but as an individual, they are encouraged to develop a strong sense of individual independence.

Based on my understanding, I showcased a family unit of a father, a mother and a child figure, I interpreted the upper part of the word "家" as three sections instead of being a single entity. The three surfaces function as tabletops. When they gathered together, they formed a complete graphic; when separated, the inner lines of these three planes reveal the strokes of my design element. In this way the tea table can be used as a whole, to serve a group of people. It can also be used a separate components. The table top as a whole is oval, symbolizing shared hospitality; when the table is separated into smaller sections, the curve also maintains this welcoming feature. The under structure, lines and planes are used to cherish the unification of my design language. The tea table looks harmonious as a singular unit of comprised individual parts.

The total size of the tea table is 42"D x 40"W x18"H, with the single section size of

36"D x 14"W x 18"H. Acknowledging human engineering so that the top surfaces would be practical for a variety of uses. I chose two different species of wood, white oak and walnut, to represent the fusion of the two cultures in which I live. The soft wood tones create warmth that echo the warmth of human beings and family values.

The second piece—difference



### Chosen Characters and Analysis

For the second furniture design, I chose the seal script character difference "分" as my reference source. In this furniture I wanted to express the two different interpretations of the saying "rules are the rules" as regarded by Chinese and Americans.

The structure of the character "分" is also divided into two parts, the upper part being two symmetrical curves; The lower part is a curve line held by another curved line. This bottom section of the character showed more potential for design, and it corresponded to the structure of the furniture. As a result, I selected the lower part of the "分" as my design element.

For this furniture project, I decided to design a pair of chairs that would encourage sitting and invite comfortable communications.

### Work description

I fused the lower part of the "分" into the side view of the chair. Curve lines, representing softness of stroke, mainly made the figure of the chair. I also added some

straight line as rails to create balance for the chair, while maintaining a clarity in the structure of "分". The whole design achieved the balance of firmness and softness, in consistence with the aesthetic language from the tea table and ensured that they belonged to a whole collection.

For the chair's upholstery parts, I chose two different materials as covering fabric, denim and cane for embodying two different cultural interpretations to the sayings "rules are rules". Denim has been used in America since the late 18th century, it typifies and represents the American spirit of exploration, innovation, adventure and the belief in an individuals' power to make change. In contrast, the cane I selected was a tightly woven pattern with a harder texture than denim, showing the Chinese intent to follow some particular patterns to achieve harmony. At the same time, these two materials match the white oak's color and texture for the whole chair structure. In addition, white oak fully embodied the difference between two varying seat materials, again addressing the concept of cultural difference. The size of the chair, 17"W x 18"D x 28"H, with the seating height 16", the sitting depth 15", was researched and reflects the legitimate ergonomic requirements for a chair design, it also keeps the beauty of proportion.

## The third piece—Inaugurate



### Chosen Characters and Analysis

I chose the character inaugurate "開" from the seal script as my source of design for my third piece of work, which is a portrait of myself as an individual absorbing both Eastern and Western culture.

The character "開" is also divided into two parts, the upper part is composed of a set of symmetric structures. The lower part has a hierarchy structure, forming an interesting foot like shape at the bottom. These two characteristics suggest the image of a person, so I selected the lower part of the "開" as my design elements for my third furniture work, a high table.

### Work Description

I fused the lower part of the word "開" to both side views of the table, for which I designed two different sets of legs. One set of legs utilized a straight line; the other legs concluded curved lines. The leg forms do result in a graphic contrast, but when they merged together as the support structure, the integration just happened naturally.

When looking at the table from the left or the right, one can see the same pattern. From my perspective, this distinction and unity define my own in reality, a mixed cultural existence. The feet and the height of the table, also hand crafted, personify this table. The table dimensions measured 28"D x 24"W x 37"H, the overall proportion balanced the chunky and stiff appearance of each single compound.

## **Part IV Conclusion**

### The “Body of Work”

The three pieces of furniture vividly reveal a creative design process that uses the source of inspiration for a translation into furniture. The process combined both the graphic beauty of the seal script, and my vision for furniture design. The meaning and background of the characters influenced the structures, details, materials and functions. The furniture’s three-dimensioned shape, which was partly emphasized or simplified by necessity, was not only shown as unique furniture, but also recognized as three-dimensional letters. Thus, I can conclude that the seal script did serve as a vital component for designing this furniture.

These three sets of work celebrate the same design vocabulary by using white oak as the material and symmetrically using both straight and curve lines. In addition, tapering components make the three sets of work an integral part of the series.

The function of these three pieces of work was not only utilitarian but also recognizes the ambience they create. They can be set in a residential environment, working as coffee table, chair, and high table, as well, bringing a welcoming atmosphere and encouraging conversation.

Furthermore, along with the creative process, I experienced a journey of exploration, discovery and expression. My concepts were solidly embedded into the functional unity of the furniture. This allowed my design ideas to be introduced to people both physically and intellectually.

## Implication for the Future

Many people, including myself, have thoughts about what furniture is and what furniture should do. Furniture has evolved with human history, and people have been accustomed to using furniture solely as a functional object for a long time. Nevertheless, furniture is not only a functional form, it also serves as a medium that can link people to spaces and which can create an aesthetic experience for enriching human beings' daily life. As a medium, furniture can provide both meaning and function. It can be embedded with information and emotions that can be conveyed to us whenever we interact with the work; either it is being put into use, or solely being a part of a harmonious environment. This encourages me to believe that I could use such specific sources of inspiration as the seal script to create future furniture design, to ultimately enrich people's experience and bring beauty into their lives.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Seal script,” last modified on 25 April 2013 at 08:49, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seal\\_script](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seal_script)

<sup>2</sup> “Seal script,” accessed 20 April 2013, [http://www.beyondcalligraphy.com/seal\\_script.html](http://www.beyondcalligraphy.com/seal_script.html)

<sup>3</sup> “Seal script-Small seal script(小篆, shoten)-Part 1,” accessed 20 April 2013, [http://www.beyondcalligraphy.com/small\\_seal\\_script.html](http://www.beyondcalligraphy.com/small_seal_script.html)

<sup>4</sup> “Seal script-Small seal script(小篆, shoten)-Part 2,” accessed 20 April 2013, [http://www.beyondcalligraphy.com/small\\_seal\\_script\\_part\\_2.html](http://www.beyondcalligraphy.com/small_seal_script_part_2.html)

<sup>5</sup> “Seal script,” accessed 20 April 2013, [http://www.beyondcalligraphy.com/seal\\_script.html](http://www.beyondcalligraphy.com/seal_script.html)

## **Bibliography**

Mattos, Gilbert L., and Norman, Jerry, trans. *Chinese Writing*, Early China Special Monograph Series No. 4. Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2000

Ouyang, Zhongshi, and Fong, Wen C., *Chinese Calligraphy (The Culture & Civilization of China)*. Yale University Press, 2008

Risatti, Howard Anthony. *A theory of craft: function and aesthetic expression*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Frances Gruber Safford, *American Furniture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, 2007.

Edward S. Cooke Jr., and Gerald W.R. Ward, and Kelly H L'Ecuyer, *The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940-1990*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston MA, 2003.

## The Body of work



Family|家, Walnut and White Oak, 42"D x 40"W x 18"H, 2012.12









Difference|分, White Oak, Cane and Denim, 17"W x 18"D x 28"H,  
2013.3







The Self Portrait 關, White Oak, 28"D x 24"W x 37"H, 2013.5



