

Aaron's Belly Button Clock aka Between Heaven and Hell

Permanent Collection- Mint Museum of Craft + Design

By Cindy Morris

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Garry Knox Bennett (b. 1934, Alameda, CA) is a furniture maker who works in Oakland, CA. He attended the California College of Arts and Crafts where he learned to paint and sculpt. In the 1960s, he used the skills he learned to found a metal plating business, specializing in handmade jewelry.

In the 1970's he began making clocks which expanded into furniture design. He is most well known for his chairs and use of conventional woods and unusual materials such as plywood, aluminum, steel, and plastics. Bennett's work is represented in the collections of the Museum of Arts and Design, De Young Museum, Fine Arts Museum, Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Montreal Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Oakland Museum, Racine Art Museum, Renwick Gallery, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. (Craft in America)

Excerpts from an oral interview of Garry Knox Bennett in his studio in Oakland, CA for the Laitman Smithsonian oral interview project about American craftspeople, conducted by Glenn Adamson. February 1, 2002.

MR. ADAMSON: Well, let's back up to where you started doing the clocks, which were really the first thing that was sort of like furniture that you did. That would have been in the early '70s - - right? -- when you started doing that?

MR. BENNETT: I think the first clock, probably the date on it, the first one -- I didn't realize it was so early -- was the clock that the Mint Museum [Mint Museum of Art/Mint Museum of Craft + Design, Charlotte, North Carolina] has, and that's '73, I think. I'm pretty sure it's '73. I didn't realize I had started making them that early. But we had met Julie Schafler [Julie: Artisans Gallery, New York], I don't know how, probably through Doris Stowens. And Julie came out and, being a New Yorker, couldn't drive, so she would hire some guy to drive her around, and we met. She came over because we were going to introduce her to some people. And we just got along just like two peas in a pod.

So when I started making these clocks, I was showing them at Gump's and that to great success, but [...] they were really cheap, man. [...] I'd like to have some of them back. So one time she [Julie] phoned me, and she knew I was making clocks. She said, "Well, would you make me some clocks for a Valentine show?" ["Garry Bennett: Clocks," Julie: Artisans' Gallery, New York, February 1977.]

And I said, "Yeah, sure." So I made 10 clocks, all heart motif. There's a couple in the book.

MR. ADAMSON: So that's why there are so many heart clocks.

MR. BENNETT: Well, there's a lot more other clocks than heart clocks, but that -- and I never sold a one. Never sold [...] one from her gallery in New York. And so I got them back, and then they went. I mean, they went to other venues and stuff.

MR. ADAMSON: Here in California?

MR. BENNETT: Probably. I can't really remember. But we kept one. I still have one. [...]

MR. ADAMSON: But who were you selling through, mostly?

MR. BENNETT: Gump's. Where else would I have sold clocks? There was a gallery in Chicago. I think it was Esther Saks [Esther Saks Gallery, Chicago, Illinois]. There was a woman, Arlene something, in Frisco. And then I was showing at Zara Gallery also, Joe Chowning [Joseph Chowning Gallery, formerly Zara Gallery, San Francisco, California]. And I was showing some of the clocks there. I think I made clocks, with [the exception of that early one at the Mint Museum] that early one, really hot and heavy for probably about two years, and I think I probably made 50 or 60 clocks.

MR. ADAMSON: So why was it clocks?

MR. BENNETT: Because they were small. And I know the first one I made. You know, I know that clock. I wanted to start -- because I was running this business. It used to be here. The roach-clip factory used to be here. And I was working downstairs, and I just wanted to start making something of my own, you know? And clocks, I don't know, I just said, "Oh, clocks." It seemed like a good idea. So that's how I got into clocks.

And then I got some very rudimentary wood tools; a jointer, radial-arm saw, and a small band saw. Didn't have a table saw at the time. And I kind of started making furniture. (Adamson)

The clock titled “Aaron’s Belly Button Clock aka Between Heaven and Hell was crafted by Garry around 1973.

Garry’s wife Sylvia provided this background on the piece:

“The name comes from the upper door-pull which is a direct casting (from a plaster of Paris impression) in sterling silver, of our middle son Aaron's belly button. Garry had made castings of our two sons belly buttons to perhaps use in jewelry (our daughter was not included in this event as she was only two or three at the time! (In Garry's retrospective book *Made In Oakland: The Furniture of Garry Knox Bennett* you will see a photograph on page 189 of Joshua and Aaron laying on the kitchen table waiting for the plaster of Paris to dry! It is bottom right along with a detail of the pull on the cabinet) [...] “

“Garry was making a lot of lost-wax cast and fabricated jewelry in the 70's and we had all of the equipment for jewelry making at the time. The castings sat around for a couple of years and Garry started into the early clock series which was the beginning of his functional work. (The jewelry was his way of easing his frustration that he was not working on sculpture which is where he started after his time at the California College of Arts and Crafts in the early 60's. [...])”

“Back to the belly buttons: when Garry made the little cabinet/clock that you now have in the museums collection, he needed a "pull" for the door and remembering the castings decided to use one as the knob. “

“Garry has always tried to avoid commercial hardware for his pieces preferring to make it himself and often he has incorporated related shapes etc. (The Boston Kneehole desk at the Smithsonian is a beautiful example of hardware made specific - pg. 98 in Garry's book). “

“Between Heaven and Hell happened to be one of my favorite pieces personally and when it was included in an early exhibition in Los Angeles in the 70' it was marked not for sale. The gallery sold it (assuming the insurance value was a retail price) and before we were made aware of the error the new owner had picked it up. Not wanting to upset anyone we just let it go. It was in a private collection in Los Angeles and when some 20 years later, the owner(s) had passed away, the cabinet/clock ended up in an antique shop where someone who was familiar with Garry's work saw it and called us. We ended up buying it back and had it in our home until it went to your museum.)”

“We are of course delighted that this very early piece (and I personally feel an important one) can now be seen by the public. It has many of the distinct aspects of Garry's work. The combinations of various materials (just was not done at that time, furniture was very brown, unpainted (with the exception of Memphis etc.) and metal was not being utilized in an overt decorative fashion. (At least from a West Coast exposure.) His range of treatment from the humble wood (vertical-grain fir which he still often works with) the very original shaping of the drawer front, painting onto the surface as one would do to a canvas (Garry's first love was painting and

he started there moving rapidly to sculpture after starting CCAC, then to functional work in the early 70's). The metal detail around the glass door was done with a jewelers saw. All these techniques he still uses some thirty plus years later.” (Bennett)

Sources:

Adamson, Glenn Interview with Garry Knox Bennett at the Artist's home in Oakland,
California February 1 and 2002

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/bennet02.htm>

Bennett, Sylvia email to Cindy Morris 8/23/07

Craft In America http://www.craftinamerica.org/artists_wood/story_84.php?