

Heavenly Metal

LOS ANGELES DESIGN HISTORIAN **JEFFREY HEAD** OFFERS A DISCERNING VIEW OF FURNITURE BY PAUL EVANS, THE PARADIGM OF AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS AND CRAFTSMANSHIP IN THE 1960S AND 1970S

TO VARYING DEGREES, all of Paul Evans's designs appeal to collectors. He crafted a wide range of objects, ranging in scale from small metal gift boxes (now selling at auction for less than \$1,500) to his elaborately designed Sculpted Steel cabinets (with exceptional examples fetching \$100,000 or much more). Today's market is identifying the hits and misses of his career, and prices are fluid in the extreme. An upcoming retrospective, scheduled to open at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, in 2013, will generate much deserved appreciation for Evans, and the tide may swell for work that was previously disregarded by collectors.

In addition to handcrafted, studio-designed pieces, Evans created a dozen separate lines for the New York-based firm Directional Furniture between 1962 and 1982, comprising nearly eight hundred different models. Within his studio and Directional pieces, Evans's most successful and widely recognized works fall into four categories: Sculpted Steel, Sculpted Bronze, Cityscape, and Argente.

Since Evans's furniture is readily identifiable, authenticity has seldom

been an issue. Dealers' and collectors' questions are easily addressed by Dorsey Reading, who was Evans's right-hand man for twenty-three years and is now a leading collector of his work. Reading also carries out restoration from his Frenchtown, New Jersey, studio.

Provenance does not appear to have a major impact on sales. Typically when it comes to signed work, some type of signature or label can contribute measurably to the value of a piece. With Evans, however, "signed" is a relative term. Commissioned and studio pieces were generally marked "PE" often followed by a year, for example "74." Others pieces were initialed by Evans's studio craftsmen, sometimes in addition to "PE." Evans did not care if his name was on the finished product and did not mind the second set of initials. He believed it gave the studio a sense of pride. The Directional pieces typically had a brass or chrome plate label such as "Paul Evans," "Paul Evans for Directional," or "AN ORIGINAL Paul Evans." All that said, the market has not shown disproportionate differences in prices: signed is expected and preferred, but is often incidental to buyers.

Sculpted Bronze



Evans's Sculpted Bronze furniture, both custom pieces and those by Directional, is aesthetically his most challenging, yet it is more spontaneous and dynamic than many of his designs. Evans did not impose a set pattern or style in the creation of the surface texture. Personal variations among studio craftsmen ensured a unique hand-worked finish. The C grade does not reflect quality, or diminished creativity, but rather it is a tax on the line's current limited appeal. Evans's sculptural bronze pieces are indifferent to the modernist code—they are more like abstract expressionist painting in the form of furniture—and they offer less historical reference than other Evans pieces. In an effort to understand this aspect of Evans's work, many describe it as brutalist, though this is misleading since there is no parallel to his furniture in brutalist architecture. The line is not for everyone. However, for those buying, an average price is approximately \$15,000—in some ways making it more accessible.

Two two-door cabinets, c. 1970; bronze with natural cleft slate tops

Current price range for Sculpted Bronze: \$5,000 to \$30,000 (or more for custom pieces)

GRADE

C

Cityscape



The initial Cityscape line for Directional consisted of five different case pieces and expanded to beds, mirrors, tables, chairs, and various accessories. Available finishes were steel, brass, nickel, and polished or brushed chrome. It was Evans's most popular furniture. The ultraclean elegant lines did not distract buyers with questions about technique or material yet still represented sophisticated tastes. Compatibility with a variety of interior settings continues to give these works added utility. In an example of Evans's trial-and-error approach, several experiments were required before discovering the best solution for making the metal facing adhere to the wood frames. In general, the polished metal pieces were unforgiving and were easily damaged if mishandled or not cared for during use. The Cityscape headboard shown here (with six electrical outlets) sold last year at the Chicago auction house Wright for \$26,250, a record price for the line.

Cityscape headboard, c. 1975; chrome-plated steel.

Current price range for Cityscape: \$5,000 (considerably less for accessories) to \$55,000

GRADE

C+

Cityscape II



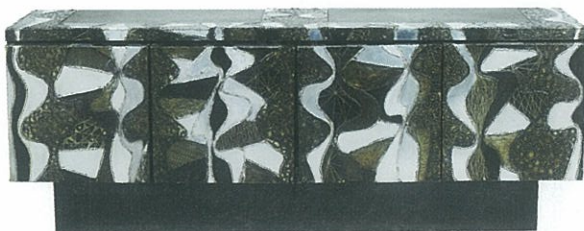
With the success of Evans's Cityscape line, Directional introduced Cityscape II; between the two lines approximately 150 different designs were produced between 1971 and 1981. Cityscape II included the Faceted series along with untitled burlwood and metal furniture; some pieces were all metal, others all wood, and still others a combination of the two. The Faceted line was based on nine differently sized shapes. The orientation of individual components required extensive planning and required the manufacture of pre-fitted forms to avoid gaps between the facets. Larger pieces could have more than forty-five angled surfaces. Directional promoted this aspect of the design in catalogues, stating it offered "a play of depth and dimension." In 2011 Wright sold one of the more unusual Faceted pieces offered at auction, a cabinet made with an uncommon Evans material—bird's-eye maple burl—and two bifold doors. It sold for \$43,750.

Cityscape II Faceted cabinet, c. 1970; brass with burl maple

Current price range for Cityscape II: \$5,000 to \$125,000

GRADE
B

Argente



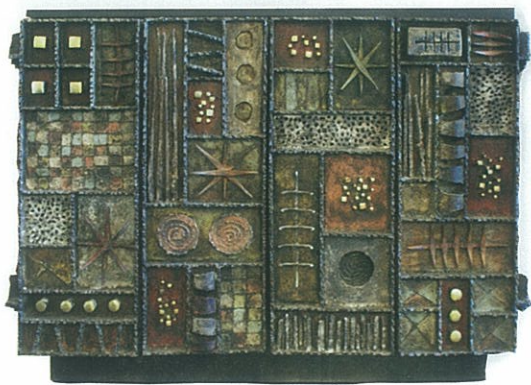
This line produced for Directional was the result of another Evans experiment, offering a way for him to apply his ongoing interest in *niello* (a decorative engraving technique for metal). The Argente technique employed 1/8-inch thick aluminum sheets that were shaped, blackened with ink, then sanded, buffed, and textured with a torch so the surface had a ripple effect. This unique labor-intensive process virtually transformed Argente into studio pieces. The line was produced for only a short time because the fumes from welding the aluminum were so toxic. (Fans circulated the air, but those doing the welding kept cough drops in their mouths to stop the constant nose and throat irritation.) The line included cabinets, an armoire, a cube that was typically used as a table, and other pieces. Evans also made a small group of sculptures with the Argente technique. The current record price for an Argente furniture piece at auction is \$66,000, set by Rago Arts in 2007. That was a two-door armoire, signed "Paul Evans 68."

Argente sideboard, 1968; aluminum, enamel, and natural cleft slate

Current price range for Argente: \$5,000 to \$50,000 (monumental-size pieces are three and four times the high estimate when available)

GRADE
A-

Sculpted Steel



Evans's commission-only Sculpted Steel furniture is his rarest. Only some seventy-five cabinets were made. Along with pedestal-based and wall-mounted cabinets, Evans also devised panels for the line that were meant as decorative pieces and room dividers. A small display panel made in 1970 sold at Wright for \$12,500 in 2011. The current record for a Sculpted Steel cabinet, set by Sotheby's in 2009, is \$218,500, the highest ever paid for a piece by Evans. Made about 1970, that cabinet is richly inlaid with welded abstract motifs—shapes and patterns painted in different colors, and finished with gold leaf. As with other Evans cabinets, Sculpted Steel pieces were often topped with natural cleft slate.

Sculpted Steel two-door console, 1964; steel with polychrome, gold leaf, and black patinated accents, natural cleft slate

Current price range for Sculpted Steel: \$25,000 to \$250,000

GRADE
A+